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# INFINITE STRATOS

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Illustration: CHOCO

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Cecilia: "I absolutely will not forgive this!"

Ling: "Oh, you want some— Shenlong!"





Laura: "You just don't know when to give up, do you."

Charl: "Shall we keep going?"

Laura/Charl: "Checkmate."

Laura: "Next is your arm."



## SETSURA



The Anatomy of Infinite Stratos

The Second Shift form of Byakushiki unlocked after Ichika achieved deep synchronization with its core, given its name by the “armed arm” complex weapons module Setsura now borne in its left hand. The increased firepower and upgraded wing thrusters, however, have further worsened its energy consumption.

Its Setsura module is capable of firing anti-energy beams from its fingertips; these beams can also be focused into blades, allowing for dual-wielded Reiraku Byakuya, at a cost of double the energy consumption. The short-range blades can be deployed either individually, in claw mode, or combined, in blade mode.

Ichika’s experience using ranged weapons during his battle with Laura also unlocked the evolution of a long-range particle cannon within Setsura called “Tsukiguchi” (“Moonpiercer”).

Japanese Name: Snow Veil	Classification: Short-Range Melee IS
Unit Code: XX-01	Equipment: “Yukihira Nigata” (“Snowflake Type-2”), Melee Blade, “Setsura” (“Snow Veil”), Left-Arm-Mounted Weapons Module
Generation: Third	Armor: Multi-Layered Nanocomposite Honeycomb Armor (With Bio-Synchronization Function)
Country: Japan	Features: “Reiraku Byakuya” (“Twilight Downfall”), Barrier-Nullifying Attack “Kasumigoromo” (“Robe of Mist”), Energy-Nullifying Shield



## BYAKUSHIKI

The Anatomy of Infinite Stratos

Ichika's personal IS. As shown here, it is in "First Shift" with both initialization and optimization complete. Its one-off ability is available even in First Shift, but at the cost of full expansion slot utilization, and no access to auxiliary gear in the form of "Equalizers."

The barrier-nullifying attack, Reiraku Byakuya, can dissipate any form of energy, allowing Byakushiki to pierce an enemy IS' shields and make a direct attack. However, it itself draws from Byakushiki's shield energy, a potentially fatal vulnerability.

Its shoulder-mounted variable-sweep high-powered wing thrusters synergize with "Ignition Boost," giving it the highest acceleration and top speed of any IS Academy student's IS.



Japanese Name:  
Type-White  
Unit Code: XX-01  
Generation: Third  
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Classification: Short-Range Melee IS  
Equipment: "Yukihira Nigata" ("Snowflake Type-2"),  
Melee Blade  
Armor: Multi-Layered Nanocomposite  
Honeycomb Armor  
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Barrier-Nullifying Attack





Maya YAMADA  
Right

Left Chifuyu ORIMURA

III





### Orimura Ichika

The only male in the world who can pilot an IS. His personal IS is “Byakushiki.”



### Shinonono Houki

Ichika’s childhood friend.  
Her personal IS is “Akatsubaki.”



### Cecilia Alcott

The British National Cadet.  
Her personal IS is “Blue Tears.”





### Huang Lingyin

The Chinese National Cadet.  
Her personal IS is “Shenlong.”



### Charles Dunois

The French National Cadet.  
Her personal IS is “Rafale Revive Custom II.”



### Laura Bodewig

The German National Cadet.  
Her personal IS is “Schwarzer Regen.”





**Chapter I** *Welcome to Summer!*

**Chapter II** *A Rhapsody of Two Kittens*

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**Chapter IV** *Quintet in Disharmony*

**Epilogue** *Dark Harvesters*

# Chapter I: Welcome to Summer!

It was August. And it was miserably, impossibly hot. I'd never liked summers in this country. Really, I'd always hated them. It wasn't even my country, anyway. I was here, first brought by my parents, and then later sent by my homeland.

Huang Lingyin. That was my name. I am a national cadet, the pilot of the IS 'Shenlong.' And, currently, I am a first year student at IS Academy.

"Uggghh, it's soooo hot..." IS Academy began its summer vacation in August, later than most other schools, so around half of its students had returned home for the break. I'd thought about doing so too, but...

"....."

But I didn't. It's not like I'd have been able to see my family even if I did, and it's not like I wanted to spend all vacation training at some base. Plus, I had one other reason. *He's still there, I bet. Ugh. Why do I always have to take the first step? Is he ever gonna grow a spine?* Frustration welled up in me as I stalked through the (not even air-conditioned!) halls of the dorm. *You know what? I should just wait him out.* I made a quick U-turn—only to come face-to-face with exactly who was frustrating me.

"Oh, hey, Rin! What's up?"

"I-Ichika?! What are you doing here?! I thought you were in your room!"

"Nah, I forgot to turn in my report. Hey, what's that you're holding?"

"Oh, those? Nothing!"

Reflexively, I hid the tickets in my hand behind my back. *Ugh... I just completely blew it.* I could've just said something like "Oh, you noticed? Well actually..." and tried to pass it off. I totally could've!

".....?"

Bleh, now he was giving me that 'what's your problem?' look of his. I cleared my throat.

"Pretty hot today, isn't it."

"Mm? You think so? It's a bit cool for the time of year."

"No, it's hot! Summers here are always so hot!"

"Oh, right, you never did like warm weather."

Uh. Hmm. I was a little bit happy that he remembered that from when we were little. *Jeez, why was I so happy about that when he kept forgetting the important things?*

"Anyway, if it's bothering you that much, wanna hang out in my room? I can put the air on."

Hm? Was this finally my chance?

"Y-Yeah, I guess. If you insist. You've got something for me to drink, right?"

"Sure. Barley tea's okay?"

"If it's cold, I'll take it."

I came up alongside Ichika as I spoke. The dorms were quiet, and it felt like we were alone. *I really hope I don't smell all sweaty.* The thought suddenly sprung to my mind, and I took a half-step away from Ichika.

No, I was fine. Well... I thought I was fine, but honestly, in this weather, anyone would sweat a little, so there was no point worrying about it. Yeah, no point worrying!

"C'mon, Rin!"

"Wh-What?!"

Ichika pushed his face up toward mine. *Wait, too close, too close!* I reflexively pushed it away.

"I've been trying to get your attention, but you were spaced out."

"Really? Oh! Sorry about that! I-I was just thinking about something!"

"Thinking about something? Huh."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing. Anyway, if there's someone you can talk about it with, you should. It's not good to keep things bottled up."

"Hmph. You don't need to tell me that."

Ugh. My heart was pounding. Why'd he have to be like this? He'd started growing again, and he was a pilot now, and... He wasn't really that lame little kid anymore... My mind racing, I fell silent, and soon he began to stare at my face again.

"Rin?"

"What do you want?!"

"What do you mean? We're here. Let's go in."

"I-I noticed, you know."

I followed Ichika into his room. It wasn't the first time I'd been there, but this time, I just couldn't relax. Ugh... *C'mon, what's wrong with me?* This was bad. The second I sat down on his bed, I could feel how bad it was.

*He smells so good...* And it was his room, so everything smelled like him. I needed to get a hold of myself, and I couldn't. *Ugggghhhhh...* I wanted to swing my legs back and forth and work off some of the nervous energy, but I didn't want him to see me doing it, so I settled for a quiet sway.

After a little bit, I noticed a book placed on the table. A book... Or really, a photo album.

"You still take photos?"

"Mm? Kinda. The past few years, Chifuyu hasn't been around, so... Yeah. The one with you, and me, and her is probably the last one. Do you remember that? Back in middle school, right before you moved?"

"Kinda." That was a lie. It wasn't just a vague memory. I still remembered it like it was yesterday. "I don't get it. It was Chifuyu's idea, right? To take family photos every few months? It doesn't seem like something she'd be into at all."

"I guess. Most of them aren't just us. She said it was important to remember everyone else who was around us, too. —Oh, here, here's some tea. It's nice and cold."

"Thanks."

As I sipped, I casually felt for my wallet in my shirt pocket. *Good... It's still there.*

"Can I take a look?"

"Sure, fine. I just went through and sorted it."

Trying my hardest to pretend that I was just curious since I saw it out, I flipped through the album. This was the first time I'd really paid attention to it, I think. The first page was, as expected, a picture of Ichika and Chifuyu. How old were they then? Chifuyu was in a middle school uniform, and Ichika was so tiny.

"That's from when I was in first grade."

"Oh, is it the first one?"

"I guess. I haven't seen any older ones."

It seemed like he was about to add "...for some reason," and I agreed. Chifuyu cared so much about him, so why was their first photo already in elementary school?

Ah. *Did all the older ones have their parents?* I didn't really know when his parents had disappeared, though I'd heard it was from before he really knew what was happening around him...





"Well, that's enough of that."

Ichika turned the page.

*He looks so shy.* Little Ichika really didn't like having his picture taken, it seemed. It was adorable, and looking at it cheered me up a little.

*Lately we hardly ever get to spend any time alone together like this. Ah... Alone... Together... Ugh, I shouldn't have thought about that... My heart is starting to— By the time I noticed, it was too late. My face was beginning to flush, and I could feel my cheeks burn.*

"Hmm, I think this one's from second grade. We went picking grapes on a field trip."

Suddenly. So, so suddenly. He sat down next to me. My heart leapt into my throat as the creak of the bed echoed. *Eh? Uh, ah... I, I hope I don't smell bad... But... We're on his bed... We're sitting next to each other, on his bed...* When I watched cartoons as a little kid, the theme song for the one with a team of girls had a line about 'my brain short-circuiting' that I just didn't understand. It was some seriously bittersweet nostalgia remembering when I was naive enough to think that just sounded dumb. And how come it could short out that easily, anyway? That sounded like a defective part. Whose fault was that soldering job?

"Rin."

"Fwah?!"

Where did that sound even come from in me? Ugh, it must have sounded so lame. I can't believe I just did that...

"Wanna?"

Eh?

Ehh?

EHHH?

Wait, wait, whaaaaaat. I needed a who-what-when-where-why-how.

Gimme a moment, here. Really? Ichika is actually— That was really, really to the point... What kind of sadist makes a girl answer a question like that? Was he teasing me because he liked me? Wait, *was* that it? Did he like me? Did Ichika really like me?

"Not interested?"

"Um, er, I-I need a second."

"Sure."

What the hell was going on here? My heart was pounding like it was about to explode. My face was so hot it hurt, and I could feel the sweat pouring off me. *Ugh, I really, really shouldn't have thought about that...* Just thinking about the sweat was putting me in a panic.

*Ugh, I should have showered before I came... No, wait. If I'd done that, it would have been because I was expecting something to happen. Something like this. Right?*

"You don't have to hold back."

Eek! Ichika's voice had drawn even closer, and I involuntarily leapt a few centimeters. **Ba-dum, Ba-dum.** My heart was pounding. Ceaselessly. Intensely, like a downpour.

"Ichi... ka..."

I nervously looked up at Ichika, and he was staring directly at me. *Oh no... I can't... Hold back...*

"Well?"

"Yes..... Oh, yes..."

"Mm."

He nodded, and reached out his hand to me, and...

"All right, I'll pour you another glass."

"...Huh?"

What was that?

"Another... glass?"

"Of barley tea."

"Barley tea?"

"You said you wanted some, right?"

"I did?"

After a few seconds of blankly repeating back what he said, Ichika's words broke my trance—and my heart.

"Oh, did you think I meant something else?"

"What? No! Absolutely not! No way, you creep!"

**Smack!** The staccato sound of an open-palm slap filled the room.



"Owww, that hurt."

"Hmph!"

Ten minutes later, Ichika was still rubbing his cheek where I slapped him. It must have really hurt, since his lips were still curled from the pain as if they'd stayed where I pushed them to. *Serves you right!* He deserved it for leading me on like that. *And you know it! That was just—* It was...

"....."

If he had kissed me then... *No, no, no, no, no! No way! He would never have done that! Ichika? We all know how he is. He's gonna be a complete blockhead until the day he dies. Probably afterward, too.* Thinking about it that way made me squirm in embarrassment at how I'd misread him. My face turned a painful red again, for an entirely different reason. *Ugh... Maybe I should slap him again...* With that idea rolling around the back of my head, I took another peek at his face.

"....."

Well, I may have been wrong about how he felt, but I wasn't wrong about how I felt. That's why just thinking about how he wasn't even trying to tease me made me even angrier. *We've known each other how long, and he still can't figure it out?*

He was even like that when we saw each other for the first time in over a year. When I was training in China as a national cadet, and saw the news

stories about ‘the boy who could pilot an IS,’ just seeing Ichika’s face for the first time in over a year made my heart flutter; even though it was only on TV. Then, because I was the right age and already had experience living in Japan, I was sent back to study at IS Academy. I was happy I’d see him again—happy, and looking forward to what might happen. When we were little, I’d always told him I’d cook for him every day... Meaning, we’d live together, maybe even get married. In middle school I never really had the opportunity to show off with a meal, but now...

*Well, it was a nice thought.* His response? “Wow, free food? For me? You’re awesome, Rin!” Close, so close, but oh-so-dismayingly off the mark. Sigh... I could feel the exhausted weight of dejection settling on my shoulders, but before I let it drag me down I was going to make one last push.

Anyway! Today will be different, I know it! From my pocket, I pulled out two slips of paper. *Calm down, Lingyin. It’ll be fine. You practiced this.*

“Ichika.”

“Hm?”

“Aren’t you gonna go anywhere for summer vacation?”

“Huh, now that you mention it that sounds nice.”

*All right! It’s working!*

“So you didn’t have anything set up? Jeez. Looks like I’ll have to bail you out.”

“And let me guess, I’m gonna have to pay you back.”

“Nothing, this time,” was what I wanted to say, but I cut myself off. I always wanted something, and being nice just this once would make him suspicious. He might even figure out that I like him.

“Well, duh. Everyone knows you’ve gotta pay to play, jeez.”

I ended up putting it the same way I usually did. Thinking back, I’d always gotten Ichika to pay me back. I think it started the first time he came to my parents’ restaurant for dinner. I was overjoyed, and I wanted him to keep coming back so I told him it was free.

Even back then he had told me, “No, no, that’s no good. After all, they say there’s no such thing as a free lunch, and besides, your dad’s cooking is great. So, please, let me pay.”

I ended up giving in and taking his money. I didn’t really think the food at my place was that amazing, but I guess it was just because I had it every day. It made me happy to hear him happy about it though.

*Of course, my parents knew exactly what I was up to... That was miserable...* Mmm. Thinking about my time with my family made my heart ache. That was another reason I didn’t go back to China this summer. I don’t want to think about that right now... It was better to forget about that for the time being. Otherwise, Ichika would notice the one thing he was really good at noticing—when someone was feeling down.

“Mm.”

“What are those?”

Ichika was staring at the tickets I'd pulled out. That was a bite... time to set the hook.

"Didn't you hear about it? They're for the water park that just opened up this month. And I should mention, they're already pre-sold out. If you want to go there and try your luck, you might get in, but only after you stand in line a couple hours."

"Really."

Ugh. He was soooooo dense. Didn't he realize just how hard these were to get my hands on?

"So, when are we going?" he asked.

"W-We?"

"That's what you're here for, right?"

"Well, yeah, but..." Perfect! I had had no idea how I was going to get him to come along with me, but it looks like I didn't even have to work at it! No, wait... I needed to calm down. I'd learned, over and over, that the most important time for caution was when victory was in your grasp. "Well. I don't think there's anyone else who'd drag you along. You should be grateful."

I slapped him gently on the cheek with the tickets. I was talking a big game, but I felt like my chest is about to explode.

"So, how much?"

"2,500 yen."

"Isn't that kinda high?"

"You don't have to buy it if you don't want to. I've got other offers."

That wasn't a lie. I just didn't want to take them. After all, the only reason I'd bothered was to set up something with him.

"Okay, fine. Sold. When are we going?"

"Tomorrow, Saturday."

"That's not a lot of notice."

*He certainly had a talent for stating the obvious. Sorry, I didn't have any choice! A friend had to bail and I bought them out!*

"Oh well, I don't really mind. You okay with it?"

"Oh, yeah! Absolutely!"

Whoops, that wasn't good. That sounded way too desperate. He could probably read me like a book.

"Where should we meet up? We've gotta be in uniform on campus, so maybe somewhere else?"

"Yeah! Good point! Why don't we meet outside the gate?"

Perfect! That was so perfectly date-like! *Which made sense, since it was a date.* Mentally, I pumped my fist. My new competition lately may have beat me out the gate, but now I was pulling into the lead!

"Okay, what time? Definitely in the morning, right?"

"Yeah, call it ten?"

"Sure."

All right! I did it! With another imagined fist pump, I finished off the second glass of barley tea in one gulp. Setting it down on the table with a rap, I stood up— Nailed it.

“What’s with that face you’re making?”

“How rude! Anyway, don’t be late!”

Half-slammimg the door shut behind me, I set back off down the hall. Out here, it was safe to fist pump for real. *I did it! I did it, I did it!* I still couldn’t yell like I wanted to, but I had to at least let it out physically. *Gotta get back to my room and get ready!*

Half-skipping, I made my way back home. Even though it was summer, I didn’t notice the heat. For just this one day, I didn’t mind that our rooms were so far apart. It was as if my legs had sprung wings. Seriously. I may have passed by a few other students—or maybe I just imagined it.

“I’m baaaack!”

As the door clattered open, my roommate, who was relaxing in bed, went wide-eyed. A half a beat later, the potato chip she’d just put in her mouth crunched.

“Welcome back...”

Blonde-haired, blue-eyed Tina Hamilton blinked at me from over a fashion magazine as if she wasn’t sure quite what she was looking at.

“Hehehe.”

“Ling, are you okay? Are you finally crazy from the heat?”

“Sure am!”

Who cared if Tina was trying to make conversation? I dove into my bed, with unhideable glee, and gave my blankets a big squeeze.

“...Are you trying to strangle your blankets?”

“Sure am!”

“You’re just trying to get me to stop bothering you, aren’t you.”

“Sure am!”

I sure was. Hahahaha.

“Sigh. Okay.”

Tina resignedly turned back to her magazine while reaching toward her bag of chips. Who cared? Ahahahaha! Why can’t it be tomorrow already?! I couldn’t just lay there and wait, though. I needed to get ready.

*My swimsuit’s still fine, I have that new outfit I just bought, and...*

Panties. *Well, uh...* It was summer. The weather made people do crazy things. And if the weather happened to make us do something crazy? Well, I needed to be prepared, just in case. Preparation is key! You can never be too prepared! Whoever decided that really knew what they were talking about!

“Hey, Tina! Didn’t they really know what they were talking about?”

“Yeah, sure.”

The crunch of another chip. This, from the girl who’s always worried that she’s getting fat. She really had no self-control. *At least I don’t have to*

worry about that! I'd found out early on that we'd have free time on last month's class trip, so I'd been dieting since June. It had paid off, and I was in perfect shape. It wouldn't be embarrassing at all if someone were to see me— Not that I know that's going to happen for sure. If someone were to see me, even without a swimsuit.

"Hey, Tina!"

"What?"

"Hot enough for ya?"

"Yeah, I guess."

The sound of another chip crunching hung in the air.



"Phew. Time for a break."

I—Yamada Maya, that is—sat at my desk in the faculty lounge, sipping from a steaming mug of tea. Hot tea in an air-conditioned room in the middle of summer. This was really living it up, wasn't it? I felt a little bit guilty wasting tax money like this. *Let me have this, just this once. I need it after finally making it through the spring semester report.*

This whole year had just been too weird. Boys who could pilot, unheard-of numbers of personal IS, one security breach after another, and now the treaty organization was after us demanding that we hand over a detailed report on what was going on, along with Orimura Ichika himself. Just thinking about it gave me a headache. It's all downhill from here, though. So let me have my break. Maybe by the other meaning, though...

I looked at the two documents in front of me and let out a sigh. Each was a student profile. Which wasn't that bad in itself, but one was Orimura Ichika's and the other was Shinonono Houki's. The duo who had personal IS without being national cadets. And while this wasn't a problem with Orimura, Shinonono's wasn't registered to any country. That was going to cause a lot of issues. Any country could technically pick her off as their own, and get her IS with her. They all wanted IS so badly they would kill for them. It made sense, even a single one could swing the balance of military power. But now, when it's one hand-built by Shinonono Tabane, the inventor of IS? Incorporating fourth-generation technology? Everyone in the world was probably desperate to get their hands on it.

I couldn't help but sigh once more. Why did they all have to be in my class? Stranger still, why did they add two more halfway through the semester? You'd never normally have that many students with personal IS in one class. *Someone must have been pulling strings.* IS Academy may not legally answer to any government, but that doesn't mean that it'd be immune to influence. *Let's try not to think too much about that.* Anyway, just sitting here worrying about it wasn't going to help. *Let's just finish this pile off, and I'll be done.*

With my tea break finished, I turned back to the mountain of paper. I picked up another sheet, and something flew nearly into my lap. *Huh?*

Another sheet. The sheet of paper had split into two! No... it must have just been two sheets stuck together.

"I wasn't expecting that. What could it—"

**Snap.** My thoughts froze.

"This is..." I'd gone through the entire pile making sure there was nothing like this in here, or so I thought. I can't believe I completely overlooked it while dealing with everything else first. "This is bad. This is really, really bad..."

The teacher's lounge may have been kept cool, but I was still sweating sheets. It was a cold sweat... And not just because of the air conditioning.



"And so I return."

Even as I languidly slid from my white Rolls-Royce before the gates of IS Academy, I was in high spirits. *It feels simply fabulous to be under the same sky as my dearest.* I, Cecilia Alcott, have taken care of my duties at home in England and returned to Japan. Alcott family responsibilities, debriefing as a national cadet, IS maintenance, a violin recital, reunion with old friends... And visiting my parents' grave.

"....."

Thinking about it made my heart ache. Why did they leave me without telling me anything? Why did they leave me alone? Why did they both leave me at once? *Someday, maybe I'll understand...*

"Mistress."

"Mm?!"

I turned to see Chelsea, my maid and lifelong companion, wearing her usual reserved smile.

"Is something the matter?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

My emotions were in turmoil, but I forced myself into the appearance of calm. Chelsea has always been quite perceptive emotionally for as long as I'd known her. She exuded an uncommon calmness for an 18-year-old. She was almost more of a big sister to me than a retainer. An object of admiration—an inspiration.

"I see. Then, shall we bring your things to your room."

With a slight nod from Chelsea, she and another maid each picked up a suitcase. As for myself—

"Will you be visiting Mr. Orimura?"

"Chelsea? I thought you were handling my luggage?"

"My apologies! There was one last thing I needed to confirm, so I came back."

"Oh, I see. What was it?"

"Are the white lace ones for him?"

"....."

*Eh?*

"I must advise you, overly-showy lingerie rarely does what it's supposed to."

"It's, er, ah—"

"Now, if you'll excuse me."

Without even waiting for a reply, Chelsea curtsied and left. *Wait, how, what?!*

"What in the—"

I'd bought those online and hidden them in a secret compartment in my luggage. How did she know?! Her gentle smile filled my mind's eye, and I burned red. Ahhhh... *I wish I could find a hole to go die in...* My face was so hot it hurt, and I'd have been sweating regardless of the weather. Especially my palms. I wished for a sink nearby.

"Huh? Oh, hey, Cecilia."

Was that— Could it be?! *Was that Ichika's voice? What is he doing here? Oh my God, did he come to welcome me?* I clutched a palm to my pounding heart, trying my best to appear my normal casual and collected self.

"Yo."

"Why, Ichika! It's been almost a week. How have you been?"

I gave him a formal curtsy as a greeting, even as my heart wanted to be anything but formal and quiet. It was him! Was he really here to welcome me? Why, Ichika!

"I simply couldn't sit still when I heard you were returning."

"Why, such flattery!"

"But true, as well. The week you were gone felt like an eternity."

"Ichika... Oh, Ichika..."

"I'll never let you go again, my princess."

*Ahh! Ahh, no! Not here! People may be watching!*

"Cecilia?"

"Ah—"

A midsummer day's dream... A daydream.

"Are you okay? You look pretty out of it. Are you sure you don't have sunstroke? You need to be careful. Sunstroke's actually pretty dangerous."

"Ah, no! I'm fine! I was simply a tad dizzy from the drive!"

"Oh? That's good."

"Indeed."

"Huh? I'm sorry, who were you?"

"I don't believe we've met. I'm Cecilia's maid, Chelsea Blanchett. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Chelsea, who must already have been finished with the luggage, had returned, and greeted Ichika with a curtsy. *But wait? Why is she alone?* I realized almost immediately. She must have waited to see what would happen, and then took the opportunity to make her entrance. She really was quite perceptive...

"Oh! I'd heard about you from Cecilia. I'm Orimura Ichika."

"Of course. Mr. Orimura. May I be so rude as to ask, how has Mistress described me?"

"Quite well. Considerate. Talented. Kind. And beautiful."

"Oh my."

Chelsea gave her usual smile. It would have been no flattery to call it stunning, but in a warm, embracing way rather than a cold one. I knew that better than anyone, and yet— *I most certainly never described her as 'beautiful' to you, Ichika!* As if she saw through my jealousy, Chelsea turned her smile to me. *Ugh... I can't fault her of all people for it...* I couldn't argue with that smile. I have never been able to.

"I've heard quite a bit about you, as well," she continued.

*Say, what?*

"Oh, really? Like what?"

Wait, wait, wait! Chelsea! Please don't tell him about that!

"Hehe. Well..." As if sensing my upset, she gave a cheekier grin than before and raised a finger to her lips. "That's for us girls to know."

Even as another woman, I felt that smile's charm.



"Wow, you really are as beautiful as she said."

"I suppose..."

A change of scene: the café attached to the dining hall. Fully air-conditioned, open year-round, and with masterfully-made drinks and seasonal pastries which put the coffee shops downtown to shame, it was packed with classmates even during summer vacation.

"Hey, isn't that Orimura from first year?"

"Wow, it is! I've never seen him in person before!"

"He's so cute! Maybe I wouldn't mind a younger man."

"I like how he seems mature for his age."

Bits and pieces of conversations drifted past my ears. Normally I'd be overjoyed to be spotted out together with Ichika. But now...

"....."

With a strained expression, I idly swirled my iced latte. The rattling of the ice cubes as I poked at them escaped everyone's notice but mine. *How could they get along so well the first time they met?* The better Ichika and Chelsea got along, the more irked I became.

"You're amazing, Ms. Blanchett. I can't believe you're not even twenty."

"Please, Mr. Orimura, call me Chelsea. You needn't be concerned how you speak to me, I'm simply a maid."

"No, I don't mind. You're older than me, to start. And it just feels weird to be impolite like that."

"I see. I'm flattered. You certainly know how to charm a woman."

"Huh? I don't think anyone's ever told me that before."

"Really?" Chelsea chuckled.

Ichika was showing her a side he'd never shown me. At the same time, frustratingly, she was playing along even though she knew how I felt. *Perhaps that rumor was true...* I'd first heard of it at the end of last month. Even yesterday, it hadn't bothered me at all, but now, I couldn't get it out of my mind: 'Orimura Ichika likes older women.'

*I'd thought it was completely baseless, but seeing it for myself...* Watching how he acts around Chelsea, it seemed almost like there was something to it. *I don't suppose there's any way for me to end up older than him...* Sigh... We were the same age. I wasn't ever going to be any older than him, and he wasn't ever going to be any younger. No amount of effort was ever going to change that. At a loss, I fell further into a gloom.

"Um? Cecilia? What's wrong? Is it something I said?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was blunt."

Not even Ichika's wince at that was enough to cheer me up. This was why I wasn't happy that he'd asked me out for coffee. *It's all Ichika's fault*, I thought to myself, putting my lips to my straw. Extra wet, no sugar. It was normally delicious, but today I couldn't stand it. But at least sipping away kept me from sighing.

"....."

"....."

Perhaps ten minutes, perhaps twenty, perhaps only one passed. Suddenly, breaking the silence, Ichika spoke up.

"Cecilia?"

"...Yes?"

"Want to go somewhere this weekend?"

"Y-Yes."



"Whew, this weather's great! It's a perfect day!"

A perfect day for a date! I clapped my hands together and pumped my fists as hard as I could. I may have only been in my room, but I was already dressed to the nines. I had a whole new outfit ready to go. *Fufufu. I've finally got Houki and Charlotte beat!* I'd been obsessing over pulling out ahead of the duo who'd lived with him for a while. It had really bothered me when I got here and heard he was already staying with another girl.

*It may be the same swimsuit I wore on the class trip, but it's the first time I've had it out on a date! Going out as a couple is completely different! Just thinking of the word couple made my cheeks turn pink. I've got the cutest pair of panties possible, and a spare pair in my purse just in case. How did the old song about summer love go? It didn't hurt to be prepared. Maybe on our way back... Yeah...*

"Today sure was fun, wasn't it."

"Yeah. Especially since I was with you, Rin."

"Yeah. I'm glad you finally appreciate the time we spend together."

"Rin..."

"Huh? Why are you grabbing me by the hand all of a sudden?"

"I finally understand. Now that we're back together again, I understand how much you've always meant to me."

"I-Ichika?"

"Rin, I love you."

"I— Wait, not here..."

"Do you hate me?"

"No..."

"Then, why not?"

"You idiot... You don't have to—"

Wouldn't that be perfect if it actually happened?

"Wouldn't it, Tina? Wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, sure."

She answered me without looking up from her ice cream. I shouldn't have even bothered to engage her. She should have known how excited I was from yesterday! Well... I couldn't be sure why she was so nonplussed, but I had my ideas.

"I'm off!"

"Bye."

"I may be late!"

"Mm-hm."

"See ya!"

"See you."

I latched my door behind me. Another fist pump, and I was on my way.



"Hm?"

"Oh?"

Two familiar faces passed by each other in front of the gates to Water World. Ling and Cecilia, after an awkward moment, each mumbled out a stiff greeting.

"Why, if it isn't Ling..."

"Y-Yeah. Hey, Cecilia..."

They waited a few paces from each other, each wondering what the other was doing there. Each wondering why the other was all dressed up.

*Cecilia must be waiting for her friends? Who cares! I'm waiting for Ichika!* Ling couldn't hold back something halfway between a sneer and a smile as she chuckled.

.....

.....

.....

Dammit! Where is he? What's wrong with him?

"What could have happened?"

At the same time as Ling stomped in frustration, Cecilia whispered. The repeated glances at their wrists made it obvious that whoever they were waiting for probably wasn't showing up. Ling was curious about Cecilia, but more focused on Ichika. Never mind 10:00 like he'd promised, it was already 10:30. *He always has been late at the worst possible times...* Just as she pulled out her phone in frustration, it rang. The number displayed on-screen was, of course, Ichika's.

"Hey! Where the hell are you? What are you doing?!"

"I'm at school."

"What?!"

"Hey, um. Ms. Yamada told me the lab that developed Byakushiki was sending a tech, and that I needed to stay while he did some tests. They probably really want a look at it now that it's gone through second shift."

"And?"

"Listen, I'm sorry. I'm not gonna be able to make it today."

"What?!"

Ling's mind boiled over in an instant, straight past anger to the world swirling around her. Ichika continued, "But, um. I tried to get in touch with you yesterday, but you weren't picking up, and when I went to your room you were already asleep."

"....."

She had gone to sleep at eight to make sure she'd be on time. And turned her phone off so it wouldn't wake her up during the night. And told Tina not to wake her up unless it was an emergency. *That idiot! That was definitely an emergency!*

"So, uh."

"Yeah."

Her reply was duller than she intended.

"I gave Cecilia my ticket, so you two can have fun together."

*What?!*

"Right. Cecili— Wait, what?!"

"Huh? Isn't she there? I told her to wait by the gate."

*Absolute silence. Maybe, maybe, maybe...*

"Maybe I should kill him..."

"Whoa, Rin, is everything all right? It sounds pretty crazy down there."

It was his nonchalant response that finally completely snapped Ling's patience.

"It is very much not all right! Don't you understand what you've done?"

"Whoa! Why are you so mad all of a sud— Yes. Right away." She could hear half of Ichika's conversation on the other end of the line. "Sorry, Rin. They want me to get going right away. Can you explain this all to Cecilia? Later!"

**Click.** The sound of his voice cruelly cut off.

"Ugh!"

Ling trembled in rage as she gripped her phone. If Cecilia had been a second later in speaking up, Ling surely would've dashed it to the ground rather than only squeezing it until it creaked.

"Er, Ling? What's the matter?"

Ling chuckled lowly, "Listen up, Cecilia. Ichika isn't coming."

"....."

Cecilia froze instantly. Seeing that her words hadn't sunk in, Ling repeated herself, "Ichika's not coming."

"Huh? Wait, why? Why are you—"

"We were supposed to go on a date today, okay?!"

"What? But he had asked me out—"

"So what? I'm the one who got the tickets to begin with, understand?!"

Cecilia gave two slow blinks, then slowly broke the ice.

"Ling..."

"WHAT?!"

"Let's go inside and get a drink. I don't really have a handle on what's going on either, but..." Above Cecilia's smile, a vein throbbed on her forehead. "...I'd like an explanation."

Before the gates of Water World. The charged air around them seemed to shimmer and twist with something other than the summer heat.



"So Ichika must have sent me here in his place."

"Sure looks like it."

"Sigh. So something *was* up. Honestly, I knew it sounded too good to be true."

"Liar. Look at how much effort you put into your outfit."

"What?! Wait, no! I just wanted to dress properly for an outing!"

"Sure, fine, whatever."

Ling folded her napkin into a paper airplane as she half-ignored Cecilia. The soft paper, as expected, simply fell to the ground rather than gliding. It was a good match for her mood.

"Hmm-hmm."

"Sigh..."

Two sighs overlapped in Water World's café.

"So?"

"So what?"

"Wanna leave?"

"I suppose. I'm in no mood to swim."

"Sigh. Guess I will too..."

Just as they both stood up, an announcement came over the PA.

"And now, let me tell you about today's main event! The duo aquatic obstacle course championship begins at one! If you want to enter, come to the reception area by noon!" At first, it sounded completely uninteresting,

but then came the kicker. "Grand prize is an all-expenses-paid, five-day six-night trip to Okinawa!"

—*That's it!*

—*What a stroke of luck!*

A trip to Okinawa. It'd be impossible for Ichika to worm his way out if they brought up what happened today. And with that in mind—

"Cecilia!"

"Ling!"

**"LET'S WIN THIS!"**

A firm handshake. Thus was born an unprecedented—if only because it was the first time—partnership.



"The first annual Water World duo aquatic obstacle course championships begins now!"

The MC shouted as she leapt into the air. Her sudden motion seemed almost enough to make her voluptuous chest jump out of her skimpy bikini top. A primarily, low-pitched roar of approval rose from the gathered crowd of spectators, perhaps for the start of the race or perhaps just for that. If nothing else, they certainly appreciated that all the contestants were women. Of course, every single man who'd tried to sign up were met with a laugh that could only mean "Come on, dude, how dense are you." Even in a female-dominated society, some things remained the same. And one of those was that swimming races were best with women as the participants. That was championship organizer and park owner Mukoujima Kouichirou's guiding principle—or at least his fetish.

"All right, everyone! Give our contestants a round of applause!"

The participants bowed, to a hail of applause. Yet one pair among them was more focused on other things. Ling and Cecilia. The two were looking each other over as they went through their warmups.

"Whew. New swimsuit, Cecilia?"

"Well, yes. How shall I phrase it, it was, ah, a change of mood."

"Liar. I bet you just wanted to show it off to Ichika. It's really obvious when you pick something that flashy."

"I don't need to hear that from you! And what about you, anyway? Slimmed down a tad from the class trip last month, haven't you?"

"Well, of course! That's what happens when you live healthily!"

"I see, I see. I'd never have expected that from a night owl like you."

Even if they were officially a duo, there was still plenty of competition going on. But each was more than ready to go, and both knew just how much was resting on this race.

"The grand prize is an all-expenses-paid, five-day six-night trip to the island paradise of Okinawa! Everyone, do your best!"

Yes. Their goal was that prize. Each of them let out a low chuckle as they dreamed of their victory.

*No matter how much of a blockhead Ichika is, he has to know what happens when a young couple takes an island vacation.*

*They say summer changes a person. So if it's their last chance to make summer memories...*

Their eyes drifted together.

"Ehe."

"Ahahah."

*I'll figure out how to get them away from Cecilia later.*

*Perhaps I can trade something to Ling for them.*

As the two finished their warmups, underlying their grins was a cunning wariness.

"So, let's explain the rules! The first team which makes it to the island in the center of this fifty-by-fifty meter pool and grabs the flag is the winner! Now, as you can see, the course spirals inward. It's littered with obstacles that teams will only be able to overcome by working together! Teams will have to show their friendship, their compatibility, and their ability to cooperate!"

Ling and Cecilia looked over the course as they listened. The central island itself loomed imposingly in midair... Well, it was hung up with wires, but that wasn't the problem.

*There's no way to swim up to that. Need to find a shortcut, like—*

*That's going to be hard to get to. And they said that if we pull it down into the pool, they'll reset it.*

Each realizing how clever the setup was, they began to plan around it.

*None of the other participants are pilots, so...*

Ling and Cecilia were each national cadets, commanding all the firepower of a 20th-century army, and they had the training to match. They'd easily be able to take any man off the street in a fight. They'd even have a fair chance against a trained soldier. The capabilities of an IS demanded an equally-capable pilot.

"All right! The race is about to begin! On your marks, ready..."

**Bang!** The report of the startup pistol echoed as 24 members of 12 teams dove into the pool at once.

"Cecilia!"

"Got it!" The neighboring team who'd snuck in a quick leg sweep at the start had reached the first island. This race was no-holds-barred. But what rule could be more suited to a pair of national cadets with military-equivalent training? "Here I go!"

"Yeah!"

Grabbing that other team's ankles, they pulled them back down to the water. Quickly, the race was split into teams focused on taking the lead and teams focused on holding back the others. But that created its own problem. As the youngest duo there, Ling and Cecilia were the center of attention. All eyes were on them—or on the targets which may as well have been painted on their backs.

"Ugh, this sucks!"

"Out of my way!"

No matter how many opponents they pulled back down, they just kept coming. It seemed like there was an arrangement between the leaders and the scrappers, who were more concerned with climbing back into their way than making progress themselves.

"Ugh, we're gonna get left behind!"

Watching the leaders reach the second island, Ling and Cecilia began to feel the pressure, and they looked over at each other.

"It's a bit early, but it's time to show what we have up our sleeves."

"Sigh... I'm not sure this is a good idea..."

"You want to win, right?"

"You're right! We have to win this!"

As they spoke over their private channel, Ling and Cecilia faced the pair blocking their way. With a roar, their foes linked arms for a lariat. Sighing, Ling and Cecilia slipped past them like a breeze. With a loud splash, the other team fell back to the pool.

"It doesn't matter how many times you pull us down, we'll keep coming back!"

The enemy team floated back to the surface. But they were missing one vital thing.

"They say, 'Woman cannot live without swimsuits...'"

"As Marie Antoinette may have said, let them swim nude."

**"EEEEEEK!"**

After a quick glance at their foes, Ling and Cecilia wadded up the tops they'd stolen and threw them backward into the crowd. As could be expected—no, even more so—the men went into a frenzy.

"That's one obstacle out of the way."

"Let's catch up."

The first island was set up to require one teammate to hold a float steady while the other clambered over a wall, but—

"We need to make up for lost time."

"Yeah. We can't let them get any further ahead."

Ling and Cecilia both leapt for the float at once. It was tiny, not even enough to hold a single woman above water alone, but each cleared it with the agility of an acrobat. A cartwheeling handspring carried Ling over clearly. Shortly after, Cecilia followed. The crowd's attention was pulled away from the lost tops by their performance, and a cheer echoed.

"That was amazing! They may only be high school students, but they must have some sort of special training!"

Next up was the second island, where they were simply able to ignore the obstacle. One was supposed to block a water jet as the other passed through, but they just raced by at once.

"Hahaha! That was easy!"

"Nothing compared to a minefield."

The third and fourth islands were equally easy, and soon they made it to the fifth and final one.

"Let's finish this!"

Realizing that just rushing forward would lose them the race, the leaders turned to face Ling and Cecilia.

"Ahahaha. As if mere civilians could handle us national—"

"That's Kizaki and Kishimoto! They're going to hit us with their martial arts!"

"...Wait, what? What do you mean, their martial arts?"

"One of them's got an Olympic gold in wrestling, and the other's got a silver in judo! I'd heard they were friends, and it looks like they've figured out how to combine their disciplines too!"

"What? A gold medalist? Hey, wait, don't they look different from everyone else?"

'Macho women' was the perfect phrase for the duo who were bearing down on Ling and Cecilia with an angry roar.

*Oh no! We're already worn out from racing here! If we try to mix it up with these muscleheads—*

*They'll simply plow over us...*

Realizing the danger of their exhaustion, the two unconsciously came to a stop. But this just made it worse.

"Got you!"

"Ugh!"

Ling and Cecilia wanted to leap backward and open some distance, but they were on a floating island... There was nowhere to run.

"We've got to... Cecilia!"

"What is it?!"

"I have a plan! Go in!"

"You want me to frontline?!"

"Yeah! There's no time to explain!"

"Ugh, whatever!"

As the medalists closed in, Cecilia rushed forward in a suicidal attack.

*If I can just distract them! I believe in you, Ling!*

"Cecilia! Turn around!"

"Eh?"

Cecilia spun around as she heard her name yelled. Filling her vision was the sole of Ling's foot.

"Whaa— BWUH!"

Right in the face. Right in the face, hard.

"Got it!"

Rin hopped off Cecilia, flung her light body toward the goal... and came up with with the flag.

"We won!"

Behind her, the island, destabilized by her leap, tipped, as the medalists' tackle carried them and Cecilia off into the water meters below.

## ***Splaaaash!***

Ling squinted while gazing into the waterspout.

"Thank you, Cecilia. I couldn't have done it without your sacrifice."

Cecilia's smiling face floated in the sky. As if she were dead.

"Fufufu." A laugh, as chill as absolute zero, welled up from the depths, followed by an even more intense waterspout. "I absolutely will not forgive this! You stepped on my face! With your foot! Ling!"

Cecilia, with Blue Tears formed around her swimsuit, glared at Ling with rage.

"Oh, you want some— Shenlong!"

Ling materialized Shenlong and quickly moved to counter.

"Wait, are you two IS Academy students? I never imagined we'd be seeing two IS today! But wait, wait! Is that allowed?"

The MC's voice was filled with a blend of enthusiasm and bewilderment. As she waved her hands, her bust jiggled along.

"Got you!"

"Rahhh!"

***Clang!*** Sparks flew as their blades clashed.

"Tears!"

"Too slow!"

As Cecilia launched her bits, Ling skillfully weaved in and out with bursts of her thrusters.

"Ugh! Inertial braking... You're as sharp as ever!"

The barrel of Cecilia's rifle wavered as it traced over targets. Ling seized on the opportunity.

"My impact cannon's faster than yours! Eat this!"

She squeezed off a triple shot while still upside down, before closing in for the kill. Cecilia was ready, though, and parried with her rifle.

"Once you stop, I've got the advantage!"

Her bits shot twice at Ling's back.

"I'm still faster at this range!"

Close enough to reach out and touch each other, the two fired their weapons at full power. Neither backed down, and—

"Ah..."

"Eh?"

"Uh?"

***FSHOOOOM!*** The explosion shook Water World.



"Anyway! This sort of thing is absolutely, ab-so-lutely! Unacceptable!"

**"Yes, ma'am..."**

Ling and Cecilia, back in their street clothes, shrunk back from the likewise clothed MC in her office. Fortunately, no one had been injured, but the pool had been partially destroyed, and even the skylight overhead was cracked.

"I can't believe you two!"

"Er, ah..."

"What?!"

"Well, um, about the competition..."

"So, uh. We still get the prize, right?"

The MC glared at them with a killer's gaze.

**"Sorry... Never mind..."**

With the damage Ling and Cecilia's IS had done, the race was of course canceled. And there were no winners in a canceled race. They felt the last flickers of hope wink out, leaving their spirits shrouded in gloom.

"Someone from the Academy will be along shortly to collect you... Try not to do any more damage before then."

**"Yeah..."**

It was already five o' clock, and the setting sun gave an orange cast to the world. The faraway buzzing of cicadas sounded almost mocking. ***Ring, ring.*** The phone in the office rang, and the MC picked it up.

"Front office. Yes, of course. Understood." With a clatter, she hung the phone up and waved at Ling and Cecilia as if to shoo them away. "They've arrived. Get out of here."

"Understood..."

As the door clicked shut behind them, they shuffled out, staring at the carpet.

"You two look really down. Was she that hard on you?"

**"What?!"**

They both looked up at once.

"Yo."

Waiting for them was the man each had planned on spending the day together with in the first place: Ichika.

"Ms. Yamada was supposed to come, but something came up. I was done with the testing, so I—"

Before he could even finish his sentence, Ling and Cecilia both took a step forward and grabbed him by his collar.

"Seriously!?"

"It's all your fault! If it wasn't for you..."

Even Ichika knew to wilt and make a quick excuse under those withering glares.

"W-Wait! I'm sorry! I don't know what for, but I'm sorry! Uh— Why don't we stop for something on the way back? Anyone in the mood for an early dessert? Huh?"

"....."

Ling and Cecilia each thought for a few seconds, then leaned forward and whispered.

"@Cruise..."

"The most expensive of the limited-edition parfaits."

"Ugh."

That was 2,500 yen each. Ichika slumped, realizing how much more it was than he'd planned on.

"Problem?"

"Oh, you think you have the option to refuse?"

"Fine... Sigh..."

For the girls, Ichika's decision was like flicking a switch. As glum as they'd been before, now, they clutched his arms joyously.

"All right, let's go!"

"Ah! Cecilia, why are you grabbing his arm?! Ichika! Me too!"

"W-What's going on? Why are you—"

**"We can barely walk."**

Ling and Cecilia's voices overlapped.

"Can't we?"

"Indeed."

"....."

Ichika sighed at their coordination, and together, slowly, they set off for @Cruise, a diner by the station.

"I suppose this will suffice as an apology."

"But we won't be so easily pleased next time, understand?"

"Sure, sure..."

The trio cast a long, long shadow in the setting sun. Such were the events of a dog day of August.

## Chapter II: A Rhapsody of Two Kittens

"Laura Bodewig. Rank, Ensign. Current assignment, IS test pilot."

A dimly-lit room. The chill air made it obvious that it was underground. This... This was a dark place in my memories.

RTI training. Resistance to interrogation. The worst part of military training. Not too long ago, the room it was conducted in had been used for actual interrogation—actual torture. The dark stains on the floor had nothing to do with the chill damp.

The sound of dripping water. Condensation falling from the ceiling ate at my mind.

"How are you feeling? Not very good, huh?"

Without the determination to stand or the energy to sit up, I let the question drift by me. The master of this room was a woman, but I could not see her face. Backlit, she stood with her hands folded behind her waist. Her voice rang clearly, almost beautifully, in the damp air.

"And how have you found three days of sleep deprivation and starvation? Hmm?"

I didn't want to respond. Didn't want to burn the energy to. That's how exhausted I was.

"This is how interrogations are. How they've always been. In a room where time stands still. Sleepless. Unfed. Nothing to keep you company but falling drops of water." The woman took a few steps, her hard soles clacking on the floor. "Mind if I sit down?"

'Do whatever.' Yes. Even if I could only think it, I thought it. The woman sat in a chair and rolled her head from side to side while slowly crossing her legs. As she did, one leg stretched out from her blinding halo. Surprisingly, it was bare. Was she not in uniform? Who was this? Definitely not my usual trainer. Likely not even a soldier. I'd thought it was the master of this room, but it seems I was wrong. Thinking again, her voice was higher than a soldier's, her cadence more languid. *Who is this? What is she doing in here?* The dissonance brought my senses back to life. Overflowing with energy, in the next moment I began to plan my escape. *That's it. First, I—*

"First, you kick out my chair, then you go for my neck? I wouldn't recommend it."

*How?!*

"How could I tell what you were thinking? Well..."

Her face slowly faded in from the light. No, only her lips. I couldn't see her eyes. She was beautiful—at least, it seemed so. Her jawline certainly was. As were her lips, which slowly formed a few words.

" "

Somehow, I couldn't make out her speech, despite having been trained in lipreading. Usually, I could easily make out speech even in utter silence. Yet now, I understood nothing. Still... *That makes sense.* It made more

sense than I wanted it to. ‘Something’ made it seem inevitable. Something in those words.

“Then, let’s begin your interrogation. Laura, are you a patriot?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re a seasoned liar, I see. You don’t have a single shred of the flag in your heart, do you.”

“Of course I do!”

She pulled out a notepad, as if to imply that she didn’t care about my answer.

“Where are your comrades? How many are there? How are they equipped? Is there any backup?”

“I’ll never tell you that!”

“I see. How about this?” Her smile twisted into a smirk. I ignored the woman’s expression, though, as I cast about for a new gambit. “There’s someone you like, isn’t there.”

“.....”

My thoughts froze.

“N-No, there’s...”

“His name is Orimura Ichi—”

“WHAT?! No, wait, don’t say it!”

“Ahahah. You’re so adorable when you blush like that!”

“I’ll kill you! I’LL KILL YOU!”

Throwing off my exhaustion and my dejection, I leapt at her. And then—



“Er... Laura?”

“Uh?”

The person Laura was pinning down with a knife to her throat was Charlotte. The place was their own room in the first year dorms at IS Academy. The time was sometime early in the morning, with the chirping of sparrows leaking in through the window.

“Um... You seemed like you were having a nightmare, so I was checking on you.”

“I... I see.”

Now that Charlotte mentioned it, Laura realized that she was covered in sweat. Her tangled hair was clinging to her skin.

“So... how much longer are we going to stay like this?”

“Oh, right... Sorry.”

Laura pulled her knife away from Charlotte’s jugular, then got up from off her. She didn’t remember much of her dream, but it couldn’t have been anything pleasant. The rush of blood to her head told her that much.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

“Really? Thanks.”

At first, Laura’d been ambivalent about being paired with Charlotte, but as time went on, she was more and more grateful for her steadyng

presence. Even after their battle, Charlotte had welcomed her as a roommate and as a friend. *I can't believe I went at her with a knife...*

Laura sighed as she stepped down from Charlotte's bed. Charlotte continued, "By the way, Laura."

"What?"

"Aren't you ever going to start wearing anything to bed?"

Charlotte pointed it out again. Just as she'd said, Laura always slept nude. Her reasoning—

"I don't have anything to wear."

"I mean, I can't argue with that, but... C'mon. You're going to catch a cold."

That was what the bath towel Charlotte always kept on her side table was for. As usual, she draped it over Laura.

"Mmm. Sorry about that. Anyway, I'm going to take a shower. What about you?"

"Yeah, I think I will, too. I'm all sweaty."

"Together, then?"

"C'mon, no way! After you!"

"I was joking."

Charlotte was stunned for a moment, hearing it with Laura's trademark deadpan delivery. That was enough time for Laura to step into the bathroom and close the door behind her. *Laura never jokes around, though. What was with that?* There must be something going on with her, emotionally. Charlotte was worried about her, as a friend. *Anyway, let's find a way to at least make her wear pajamas.* It was early in the morning, but Charlotte was already deep in thought.



"So you want to go shopping?"

"Yeah."

Laura and Charlotte spoke over breakfast in the dorm cafeteria. While they weren't the only ones there, it certainly wasn't crowded, as the only other students there were coming back from morning practice. As for their menu: macaroni salad, toast, and yogurt. Laura, though, had one more item.

"Are you sure you're gonna feel well after a steak for breakfast?"

"Why not? Morning is the most efficient time to eat. It's been scientifically proven. It's weirder if you just go to sleep after, like you would with dinner. Any energy you don't burn off just turns into fat, right? So I won't stop you if you actually want to thicken up, but..."

"Say, Laura. Where'd you hear that, anyway?"

"My bride Ichika."

"Phew... You really don't sound like yourself today."

*I've never seen her this emotional,* Charlotte thought as she poked her fork through the holes in her macaroni.

"Hey, why are you doing that?"

"Eating macaroni?"

"No, I mean. Why are you threading it on your fork, rather than just stabbing it?" Laura's expression was so serious that Charlotte paused for a moment. "Why? Well, why not?"

"Why not, huh..."

"You should give it a try too. It's pretty fun."

*As Charlotte spoke, she already regretted it. Wait, I sound like a little kid. Laura's probably...*

"*You're right, something's definitely funny.*"

"*Really? You enjoy it too?*"

"*Something's funny with your head.*"

*No way! Of course not! Laura would never say that!*

"Charlotte."

**Gulp!**

"You're right, this is fun. Maybe I'll try to do it with all of them."

As Laura spoke, she began to push her macaroni around her plate. It looked like she really was having fun. Charlotte was relieved.





"This is harder than I thought."

Laura was struggling fiercely with the last few pieces. Somehow, Charlotte was reminded of a cat she'd once had, and became lost in thought for a moment. *She was always clumsy in the funniest ways. I still remember her face when she chased a ball of yarn so long that it unraveled.*

"I did it."

"Yay!"

Charlotte clapped as Laura brandished her macaroni-laden fork. Other students began to look over, curious at the commotion.

"So, when did you want to go shopping?"

"Hmm. I was thinking we should head out around ten, how's that sound? Maybe spend an hour or so looking around, and get lunch wherever looks good."

"I see. I should invite my bride along. I'm going to make a great husband."

"Ah— Ahaha... I'm sure..."



"He's not in his room. He's not answering his phone either. Where'd he go? Is he cheating on me?"

"Maybe he's just not home."

"I can probably get through to him over IS private channel. I'll give that a shot."

"Wait! Bad idea! Laura, you can't just use IS functions for whatever you want."

"Whatever. I'm more worried about finding my bride."

"Ms. Orimura will be mad."

Laura stopped abruptly.

"You're right. He needs his private time. All right, Charlotte. Let's get going."

"Yeah."

The two went back to their room to prepare to go out. Which should have meant street clothes, but...

"Um... Laura? Why are you in military uniform?"

"It's the only other clothes I own."

"....." Charlotte held her head in her hands. Now that she thought of it, she never had seen Laura hanging around their room in normal clothing. "Your school uniform's fine. Plus, you don't want anyone from Germany to be mad at you, right?"

"Oh, good point. All right, I'll change into my school uniform."

Laura changed with a speed surprising for a girl, and no more than 15 minutes later, they headed out.

"First, let's take a bus to the station."

"Okay."

Almost as soon as they reached the stop, a bus arrived, and they boarded. It was still summer vacation, so it was nearly empty even at a little past ten. Laura was in her school uniform, and Charlotte was in street clothes: a summery one-piece, with cooling light blue accents. Unusually for a city bus, rather than being air-conditioned, the windows were open to let in a breeze.

*You know, I've never gotten the chance to really take a look around town. I'll have to do that today.* The breeze lapped at Charlotte as she gazed out the window. Her golden hair glimmered in the sun as it fluttered back and forth.

*Next to her, Laura's eye fixed intently on feature after feature. That building would make an ideal sniper's nest. The supermarket across the street could provide long-term supplies. I'll need to acquire a map of the sewer and subway systems. And then, find a building with a backup generator... Her silver tresses had their own glimmer, but her sharp glare made her seem out of place.*

"Hey, look over there! At those two!"

"Wow, she's beautiful."

"Her friend is cute too. Are they models?"

"I dunno, it looks like the one with silver hair is in a school uniform. I've never seen that design before, though."

"Silly! That's an IS Academy uniform. They let you customize them there."

"IS Academy? You mean the one with an acceptance rate under one in ten thousand?"

"Yeah. You have to be the best of the best, on a national level, to get in there."

"Wow! It's no fair that she gets to be that pretty, too."

"Life isn't fair."

A group of high school girls, so excited they couldn't keep their voices down, were watching Charlotte and Laura. Their excited conversation drifted across the narrow space of the bus.

"....."

Charlotte had never heard such praise, and hid her face in embarrassment. Laura, on the other hand, let it pass by as she returned to her mental simulation of the city at war.

*The power of an IS has no rival. But still, wars aren't won by individual soldiers. If an invading force attempted to move in and hold territory, the defenders would need to set up an infantry line themselves.*

IS were only useful if the goal was to level the entire city.

*If I assume that the attack would be preceded with a bombing raid, multiple independent mobile SAM launchers would also be necessary. If possible, also MANPADS. Javelins or Starstreaks could also be used as anti-tank weaponry. Most importantly—*

"Laura. Laura!"

"What?"

"We're at our stop. C'mon, save whatever it is for later."

"Fine."

Together with the other passengers, they stepped off the bus and walked into the mall. Charlotte pulled a magazine from her bag and began checking the directory printed inside for something.

"Hmm, okay. It's probably best to go in this order."

"Right."

"Let's check out the clothes first, and get lunch on the way. I was also going to look at housewares and accessories, if you don't mind."

"I'm not really sure what I'm doing, so I'll just follow you."

As usual, Laura was unaccustomed to what normal teen girls were into. She may have been one herself, but she still didn't understand them at all. Still, it felt a bit weird to her. She'd always been insistent on getting on her own way, but she was following along with Charlotte without a complaint. Normally she'd have chosen her own route even if she wasn't completely sure. *It's surely strange...* Charlotte had some sort of strange authority. Perhaps this was the motherly touch Laura'd never known.

"Laura, are you listening?"

"Huh— Oh, sorry. I missed that."

"Come on. Do you prefer slacks or a skirt?"

"I'm fine either—"

"Don't just tell me you're fine either way. Sometimes you're just like Ichika."

Charlotte let out a sigh, while Laura broke into a proud grin.

"It's good for a husband and bride to be alike."

Charlotte let out another sigh in frustration at the absurdity and changed the topic.

"Anyway, let's head up to the seventh floor. The sixth and fifth are ladies' clothing too, so we can work our way down."

"Huh? Why start at the top? What's wrong with working our way up?"

"It's best to go top to bottom. See, it's how the stores are set up."

Charlotte pointed at something in the magazine, but...

"I don't get it."

Charlotte grumbled, "The lower floors already have fall clothing. Up above has mostly changed over too, but there's still some summer clothing on clearance, so..."

"I don't need fall clothing."

"Eh? Why not?"

"It's summer."

Laura said it matter-of-factly, but Charlotte was dumbfounded.

"I can buy fall clothes in fall."

"Wait, but... Girls normally do their shopping in advance."

"Oh? I see. If the war's already begun, it's too late to begin mobilization. Is it like that?"

"Sure... Yeah. Yeah, it is."

"Forewarned is forearmed, then."

That wasn't really the way a girl would normally think of it, but Laura had managed to work her way to a similar conclusion. It would be strange to call it wrong, per se, so Charlotte let it go.

"Anyway, let's work our way through. If there's anything you don't understand, just ask."

"Sure. I'm glad you're here," Laura replied.

The two took an elevator to the seventh floor. The air conditioning was turned up to deal with the masses of teenagers doing their shopping.

"It'd be bad if we got split up. Let's hold hands."

"O-Okay."

Charlotte said it casually, but Laura nodded with a bit of shyness. For some reason, she was just going along again.

"All right, let's start here."

"'Third Surface.' That's a funny name."

"It's pretty popular, though. Look at all the girls in there."

As Laura looked in, she saw that it was indeed packed with middle school and high school girls. The store was buzzing, especially because of the sales. It was only to be expected that it was a bit understaffed. But—

"....." A bag slipped out of the manager's hand. "A blonde, and one with silver hair!"

As soon as the manager noticed them, the staff followed along. As if mesmerized, they began to talk among themselves.

"They're like dolls..."

"Are they filming?"

"Yuri, can you handle this one?"

The manager looked at Laura and Charlotte before shuffling over. As if entranced, or as if the heat was getting to her.

"Wait, what, me? Are you even going to pick—"

The clerk lost her words mid-complaint as she looked over the duo. Two beauties as if plucked from the pages of a storybook, and holding hands with fingers intertwined. Lightly, oh so ephemerally. It made them seem even more ethereal.

"Wh-What can I help you find?"

The manager's excitement was visible, and made her seem out of place in her suit. It was striking enough to make Charlotte put aside her thoughts of leaving the store to get away from the stares.

"I'm looking for clothing for her. Do you have any recommendations?" Charlotte asked.

"Ah, the girl with the silver hair? Just a moment, I'll take a look! Here!"

The manager pulled something off a mannequin—one which would likely sell even out of season, placed in the front of the store to draw in

customers. While it wasn't strictly just for advertising, it was the sort of thing that would normally only be removed from the mannequin for special customers. Normally.

"How about this? I think this white summer shirt matches your hair fabulously."

"It's so sheer you can almost see through it. Laura, what do you think?"

"I don't kn—"

"No saying you don't know."

"Ugh..."

Headed off before she could even finish her sentence, Laura let a rare look of offense creep over her face. The manager blinked as the childish expression made her reevaluate her assessment of Laura as the calm one.

"White, huh. I don't mind it. I'm wearing that color now."

"Ah, yes."

The unexpectedly un-girlish response left the manager at a loss for words.

"Why not try it on, Laura?"

"It would be too mu—"

"No saying it would be too much trouble."

"....."

Cut off again, Laura fell silent. Meanwhile, the manager and Charlotte also picked out an undershirt and bottoms.

"Stretch denim capris, and..."

"How about a V-neck camisole?"

"That'd be great. But a complementary color, or a contrasting one?"

Hmm..."

They happily worked their way through the options. Laura, realizing that it was fruitless to argue, simply stood back and watched. *What on earth are they so excited about?* Clothes just needed to keep you warm and decent. Laura was always practical above all else, and now was no different.

"All right, Laura. Try these on."

"Okay."

"The dressing rooms are this way."

Only after she was led to the dressing room and stepped inside did Laura let out a small sigh. *I guess I have to deal with it. I'm the one who wanted to dress up for Ichika.*

Laura stripped as she thought. Her milky-white skin shone like alabaster under the light. *Mmm...*

She gave the mirror a quick glance. Standing only in her underwear, her lithe yet toned physique was obvious. *I don't really get why, but I guess guys find this appealing?* Ichika did, especially. *Hmm...* She tried out a pose she'd seen in a magazine. The mirror reflected her alluring form, with its barely-covered curves sure to entrance any man.

"This is ludicrous..."

Embarrassed at herself, Laura went back to changing. Looking again at the clothes Charlotte had chosen, she realized it was more of a ‘cool’ look. *I wish she’d picked out something cute instead. Ichika would love...*

“Laura, your outfit’s adorable.”

“Just my outfit?”

“Not as much as you.”

“Silly...”

“And are you wearing anything cute underneath that?”

“Ah...”

“Show me.”

“Mm...”

Caught up in her own fantasy, Laura silently blushed.

“No, just... I know it would never go like that, but...”

It wasn’t impossible.

“Hey, Laura! Are you changed yet?”

It was Charlotte calling from outside the door. Laura quickly slipped back into her uniform, then opened the door.

“Huh? Why are you still in your uniform?”

“Charlotte.”

“Hm? What, didn’t you like it?”

“That’s not it. Just...”

A question mark floated over Charlotte’s head as she pondered the rare sight of Laura at a loss for words.

“Maybe... Maybe something a little cuter...”

Charlotte was momentarily stunned as Laura embarrassedly managed a bit of girlishness. Quickly, though, she lit up and sprung to action.

“Oh, sure! Something cuter? I’ll pick something out right away!” Laura’s sudden enthusiasm, in turn, fired Charlotte up even more. “So, what are you thinking? Looking for a particular color or style?”

“I suppose. Something which shows off a fair amount of skin would be nice.”

“Got it!” Charlotte rushed back to the manager, and they both began to search through the clothing. “That off-the-shoulder one-piece, and that bracelet. And then maybe...”

Charlotte chose an outfit as cheerfully as if it was for herself.

“If it’s going to show a lot of skin, a chic black would be great. It contrasts with your hair well, too.”

“Please, nothing too flashy.”

Laura was made a bit nervous by Charlotte’s enthusiasm, and felt that she needed the reminder. But Charlotte answered cheerily, “It’ll be fine! Just leave it to me.”

“Okay.”

*Seeing Charlotte, who was normally so composed, become so energetic, Laura couldn't argue. Her fashion sense is better than mine. I should just relax. Perhaps 20 minutes later, as Laura stepped out of the dressing room, the entire store gasped.*

"Wow, she's beautiful."

"She's like a fairy..."

All eyes were drawn to her as she stood with an embarrassed expression. She was wearing a black one-piece skirt, off the shoulder. Frills scattered about gave it a bit of cuteness. Its hemline, close to that of a miniskirt, matched Laura's otherworldly look; it truly was the outfit of a fairy.





"You even picked out shoes? I'm surprised."

"It's a special outfit. You need mules to go with it."

Laura, who'd never worn heels before, stumbled. At the same moment as the entire store gasped, Charlotte caught her.

"Thanks."

"Anytime."

Charlotte gave a brief bow as Laura steadied himself. They were like a young nobleman and princess, like a scene from a fairytale.

"Can I take a picture?"

"Ooh, me too!"

"Shake my hand!"

"Me too! Me too!"

In the blink of an eye, they were surrounded. The commotion had spread far and wide, with people even joining in from outside the store.



"I'm exhausted."

"I didn't think we'd take that long in the first store."

It was already past noon, and Laura and Charlotte were having lunch on the café terrace. Laura had ordered the daily special pasta, while Charlotte was having lasagna.

"I did buy some nice things."

"You should have worn them home. You don't get to do this very often."

"Well, um, uh... I don't want it to get dirty."

"Oh? Are you sure it's not because you want Ichika to see it first?"

"What?! No way! That's not it at all!"

Charlotte could tell from Laura's flustered blush that she'd hit the mark, but pretended not to notice.

"Oh, okay. Sorry for being weird about it."

"Jeez."

"Laura."

"Wh-What?"

"You have your fork and spoon backwards."

"Ngh!"

Only now did Laura notice she was lifting her pasta to her mouth with her spoon, and quickly pulled it away.

"So, what did you want to do this afternoon?"

"I wanted to look around home goods, and maybe find a watch. I kinda like Japanese watches."

"You want a watch?"

"Yeah, since we're out shopping anyway. How about you, Laura? Anything Japanese you want?"

Laura thought for a moment before answering clearly.

"A katana."

"H-How about something a little more feminine?"

"No."

A swift response. Charlotte had expected it, but she still hung her head. That was when Charlotte noticed the woman at the next table.

"What on earth am I gonna do about this..." She was in her late 20s, and wearing a tight-fitting suit. Whatever was bothering her was worrying enough that her aglio e olio had cooled without being touched. "Sigh..."

Her sigh exuded the inky blackness of the void.

"Hey, Laura."

"We should mind our own business."

This time, Laura cut Charlotte off before she could finish. It shocked Charlotte a little at first, but then she broke out in a grin.

"So you do understand me."

"Kind of... Anyway, what did you want to do?"

"At least ask her what happened." Charlotte turned to the woman and called out. "Is something the matter?"

"Eh? Ah—"

As soon as she glanced over, the woman stood up swiftly enough to send her chair to the ground with a clatter. Rushing to Charlotte, she gripped her hand.

"You two!"

"Uh, yes?"

"Do you need jobs?!"

"**EHHH?!**"



"So anyway, they quit out of nowhere. Didn't even properly quit, just ran off together," the woman let out an exhausted laugh.

"Oh?"

"Mm."

"But today's really important! Someone from corporate is coming! So please—please work here just for a day!"

The restaurant she was recruiting for was more than just a normal restaurant. Women working there dressed as servants, and men as butlers—in other words, it was a maid (and butler) café.

"Well... I suppose, but..." Charlotte, having finished changing, began to ask a bit gingerly. "Why am I dressing as a butler then?"

"Well, I mean. It looks so good on you! You pull it off so much better than the guys here."

"I guess..."

*Charlotte sighed at the unwanted praise. I'd rather be in the maid outfit... Laura looks so cute in it... Slightly dejectedly, she looked down at her tux. I'm not sure about this, but maybe she's right...*

Perhaps realizing Charlotte's ambivalence, the manager, who'd also changed into a maid outfit, suddenly clutched her hand.

"You'll be fine! You look perfect!"

"R-Really?!"

Charlotte, looking slightly embarrassed, gave a polite laugh. *That's what I was worried about...* As her own worries roiled in her head, she looked over at Laura again. Laura's slender but toned body was wrapped in a frilly maid's dress. Her silver hair cascaded down over it, as if bridging the outfit and herself. Her eyepatch only made her seem more mysterious.

*I'm jealous. She looks adorable in that.* It really underlined Laura's appeal, Charlotte thought. Laura was the kind of girl who, even in men's clothing, would be instantly obvious as a girl with a bit of an edge. Meanwhile, she herself looked like a boy with an exceptionally cute face. She let out a sigh at the realization.

"Boss, can we get some help out here?"

The shift manager's voice drifted in. The general manager finished adjusting her outfit, and began to step out of the back room.

"Er, one other question."

"Hm?"

"What's the name of this restaurant?"

With a smile, the general manager gathered her skirt in her hands and gave a curtsy almost too cutely for a woman of her age.

"Welcome to @Cruise!"



"Dunois, table four needs a black tea and a coffee."

"Understood."

Charlotte picked up the drinks from the counter and placed them on a tray engraved with an @ symbol. Even such a simple act showed off her natural elegance, to her newfound coworkers' sudden gasps. While it was her first part-time job, she moved with not an ounce of nervous reticence, only a confidence that seemed practiced but not frazzled. It was certainly enough to draw stares from the female customers.

"My apologies for the wait! And whose is the black tea?"

"I-It's mine."

Even though she was older than Charlotte, the customer stumbled through a bit of nervousness as she answered. After placing the tea and the coffee in front of the customers, Charlotte asked if either would like the 'special service.'

"Would you like sugar or cream? I can stir them in for you."

"Yes, please. Heavy on both, if you don't mind."

"Same here."

Both of them normally took their drinks black, but the opportunity to enjoy service from a splendid young butler turned their answers to wholehearted 'yes'es. Whether she realized this or not, Charlotte answered with a gentle smile and nod.

"Understood. Pardon me." Her pale, beautiful fingers wrapped around a spoon as she stirred. Its rattle against the mug took the customers' breath away. "Here you are."

"T-Thanks..."

Taking the mug from Charlotte's hands, the woman nervously raised it to her mouth. Next was the woman with coffee, who nervously, jerkily, lifted it to her lips and took a sip.

"Of course, mesdemoiselles, if there is anything else I can do for you, do not hesitate to ask."

After speaking, Charlotte gave a bow which could only be described as 'noble,' leaving the customers so stunned they could only nod. *Phew, waiting tables is hard work. I wonder how Laura's doing?* As she continued working, Charlotte scanned the room for Laura. Soon, she spotted her taking orders at a table of three men.

"Hey, you're a cute one. What's your name, baby?"

"....."

"What time do you get off? Wanna go out later?"

**Bang!** Laura half-placed, half-slammed a cup on the table, scattering drops of water, then coldly intoned to her shocked audience.

"Your water. Drink it."

"Ooh, feisty! I wanna know where you keep that fire insi—"

Before he could even finish his sentence, much less give an order, Laura stalked away from the table. Stepping up to the counter, she spoke something and waited a moment, then brought a drink back.

"Drink."

Laura placed it on the table, a bit more gently than before, if only as not to crack the saucer. Still, coffee splashed out.

"Wait, I don't remember ordering a coffee..."

"Oh, you're not a customer? Then get out."

"No, it's not like that, I just wanted to take a look at the menu before..."

Whether it was because he was infatuated with Laura or because he was taken aback by her impatience with him, the man was searching for the right words as he spoke. In a society run by women, only the truly courageous or true morons would try pickup lines like that. This group was definitely the second.

"Like, it's not that I don't want coffee, but maybe I was looking for an Arehalli or a Kilimanjaro..."

Laura sneered with a joyless glare as if to cut him off without even speaking, "Oh? Can plebs like you even tell the difference?"

"Well, um... Sorry..."

The men sunk back in their seats before her absolute zero glare and unforgiving sneer, and quietly sipped their coffee.

"Get out of here once you finish. You're taking up a table."

"Yes, ma'am..."

The Teutonic ice queen was still secure on her throne. But her unapproachable attitude, combined with her good looks, had its own charm. Most of the men in the café were palpably eager to receive the same treatment.

"Wow, she's amazing."

"I want her to insult me! I want her to look down on me! I want her to discriminate against me!"

A number of tables were quite excited by the display. Even the other tables, and staff, tried their hardest to pretend not to be watching.

"Can I add on to my order? And can you have the blond butler from before bring it?"

"A coffee, please! From the silver-haired maid!"

"One from the fabulous butler!"

"Mine from the beautiful maid!"

The commotion spread through the café, reaching a fever pitch. Laura and Charlotte were at a loss for what to do, until the manager stepped in and guided them table by table. She was a true professional, skillfully weaving them a path through a crowds half again as large as normal. This continued for two hours. But just as Charlotte and Laura began to show signs of mental exhaustion, it happened.

"EVERYONE GET DOWN!"

The door crashed open, and three men roared in like an avalanche. For the blink of an eye, the café's patrons were unable to process what they were seeing, but as a gunshot rang out screams followed.

"EEEEEEK!"

"No one move! Be quiet!"

The men were clad in bomber jackets and jeans, with masks over their faces and guns in their hands. Bills fluttered down from them their backpacks. This was obviously a robbery in progress. Likely bank robbers making their escape. They may have seemed more like bemusing escapees from a 20th century manga, but still. They were armed. They couldn't be ignored.

"This is the police! We have you surrounded! Come out with your hands up! Repeat—"

This was prime real estate by the station. The police response was swift, with patrol cars sealing off the roads while officers with riot shields and guns fanned out around the building.

"For some reason..."

"The police..."

"Are doing this old school too..."

Customers whispered back and forth, almost forgetting their status as hostages as they recounted something lost on teens.

"Boss, whadda we do? They're gonna get us all!"

"Chill! Don't lose your head. We got hostages. They ain't gonna storm us."

The apparent leader of the trio, a well-built man, put a bit of courage back in his comrades.

"You're right. We still got what we earned our paycheck with," said a fellow robber as he racked his pump-action shotgun, then fired into the ceiling.

"EEEEEEK!"

As a light tube shattered, a woman covered her ears with her hands and shrieked in terror. This time, the leader fired a shot from his pistol in the air to silence her.

"QUIET DOWN! Do what we say, and no one gets hurt. Got it?"

The woman's face turned a pale white, and she nodded while chewing on her lip.

"Anyone listening out there? If you want us to let the hostages go, bring us a car! No tail and no tracker!"

The man punctuated his demands with gunfire. Nothing was hit except the windshield of a patrol car, but it was still enough to send the bystanders into a panic.

"Haha, look at 'em squirm."

"The more peaceful a country is, the easier it is to pull off a job!"

"You know it."

The robbers echoed in brutal laughter. Meanwhile, from the shadows, a single pair of eyes gazed coolly. *One with a shotgun, one with an SMG, and the leader with a pistol. It's possible they have other weapons, but for now...* Charlotte stayed low as she analyzed the situation. As her eyes darted around the restaurant, she was taken aback.

"....."

One person other than the robbers was standing: Laura. With her silver hair, her eyepatch, her beauty, any eye would stop on her.

"What's your problem? Didn't you hear us tell you to keep it down?"

As could be expected, the leader turned toward her. Laura's gaze turned over the gun in his hand for the blink of an eye.

"Aren't you listening? Do you not speak Japanese?!"

"It's all good, boss. We got plenty of time. Let's make her serve us lunch!"

"The hell you talkin' about?"

"C'mon, she's a little stunner!"

"I'm in too. I ain't never been to a maid café."

As his two underlings snickered, the boss furled his eyebrows and sat down on a nearby sofa.

"Fine, whatever. I'm thirsty. Bring me a menu."

Laura kept her gaze firmly on the men as she reached below the counter. What she pulled forth was a full pitcher of ice.

"...The hell's this?"

"Water."

"Thought I asked for a menu."

"Shut up and drink. If you can."

Laura suddenly flipped the tray. The ice water soared up into the air, and with a quick spin she grabbed a cube—and flicked it away.

“Owww! What the hell are you—”

A frozen bullet. It smashed into his index finger which he’d lifted off the trigger, and while he was still stunned, more pounded into his eyelids, his throat, and between his eyes. Even before he could shout, Laura drove her knee into another robber’s gut.

“The fuck?! You little—”

The leader, recovering from his initial pain, opened fire with his pistol. The roar of exploding powder filled the room, but the bullets didn’t find their mark. Darting from sofa to table, potted plant to water cooler, Laura used the restaurant’s furniture as shields as she moved with a speed belied by her slender frame.

“Boss! She’s—”

“Chill! We can handle one brat!”

“Sorry, but there’s not just one.”

As the leader swapped magazines, a fabulous young butler—well, beautiful young Charlotte—closed in from behind. She let out a sigh of frustrated resignation as she moved, not just because she was dragged into this, but because Laura had acted alone, and that she had to support.

“What the hell?!”

“Maybe I’m glad I’m dressed as a butler. Hm, yeah— It lets me kick high.”

As she spoke, Charlotte kicked the leader’s pistol from his hand. Following through, she brought her leg down in an axe kick on the shoulder of the robber with a shotgun. With a sickening crunch, his arm hung limp.

Laura and Charlotte were both used to this—no, something more. It was proof of their experience in far fiercer, faster battles. As pilots with their own personal IS, their countries had naturally put them through training for every conceivable situation. Being a national cadet didn’t spare them from that. If anything, the opposite. They were trained to overcome any opposition, even without the use of their IS. Of course, as a soldier, Laura’s technique, reactions, and conditioning were notably beyond Charlotte’s. But in a situation like this, it made no difference.

“Target 2 neutralized— Laura?”

“No problems. Target 3 neutralized.”

Confirming that their targets had lost consciousness and mobility—in other words, were knocked out—the two nodded to each other. Only one target was left: the leader, who had just scrambled his way back to his pistol as their focus returned to him, and raised it to fire in his left hand.

“Gimme a fuckin’ break! No way am I gonna get taken down by two kids!”

The very instant that his unbroken left index finger curled around the trigger, Laura shot toward him like a bullet. As Charlotte twisted to evade, she planted her foot on an @Cruise tray. Stomping down on its rim, she

flipped ‘something’ up in the air. With perfect timing, Laura snatched it as it flew. A weapon, shining dimly. Her hand now wrapped around murder itself, Laura pressed its muzzle between the leader’s eyes.

“You’re too slow. Now die.”

“Eh? Wait, Laura!”

With a thunk, Laura flipped it around and pistol-whipped on his temple, sending him sprawling like a marionette with its strings cut.

“All targets neutralized.”

“Phew. You scared me there for a second.”

“Saying that makes amateurs hesitate. It’s a safer way to finish the job.”

“If you say so.”

Laura would never actually pull the trigger. But Charlotte wouldn’t say that to her out loud. For some time, silence filled the café. The civilians inside, patrons and staff alike, were as breathless as if they’d just ridden a roller coaster, and only slowly began to raise their heads.

“Is it over?”

“Are we safe?”

“What just...”

They blinked inquisitively at Charlotte and Laura, understanding that they were out of danger, but not what had just happened. The manager, likewise stunned, could only wonder whether corporate would believe her report that ‘a beautiful silver-haired maid and a strapping young blond (female) butler had caused the damage while subduing a gang of bank robbers.’

“All right! Thanks, maid and butler!”

As it sunk in that the danger had passed, the café suddenly buzzed.

Sensing the change, the police began to close in.

“Hmm, looks like Japanese police know what they’re doing.”

“Come on, Laura! We’re national cadets with our own IS! We can’t get found out!”

“You’re right. Let’s get out of here.”

As could be expected, outside of the area the police had roped off, a crowd of reporters had gathered. But then, things changed for the worse.

“I’ll blow you all up before I go to jail!”

The leader who they had thought was unconscious staggered to his feet and flung his bomber jacket open as he shouted crazily. His torso was wrapped with enough plastic explosives to easily flatten the 40-square-meter café. And the trigger was, of course, in his hand.

“Wow...”

“He really is old school.”

Even as the words slipped out, the café slipped yet deeper into a panic than before. But—

“You just don’t know when to give up, do you.”

Laura sent her skirt fluttering with a kick of her right leg, and every man in the room’s eyes were drawn to the band of white fabric which peeked

out. A moment later, she brought her heel down. Catching the edge of a table, it sent the pistol flying into the air, where Charlotte tumbled over Laura's back to catch it. And then... **Rat-a-tat-a-tat!**

"Checkmate."

Double bursts of five shots tore through the detonator, fuse, and wiring connecting them—but nothing more.

"Shall we keep going?"

"Next is your arm."

With two pistols pointed at him, the leader's roars of rage faded to a pitiful whimper, "Sorry! I'm so sorry! I'll never do this again! Just let me live!"

Without staying to listen to his admission of defeat, Laura and Charlotte slipped out. Like a black gust.



"It's getting late."

Two hours had passed since the robbery, and as the duo finished their shopping and stepped out of the department store, the world had taken on an orange cast.

"Was that everything?"

"Yeah. But c'mon, Laura. You've been all 'you pick' and 'get whatever' for a while now. Girls don't do that!"

"Stop scolding me. It'll give you wrinkles."

"It will *not*!"

Charlotte's mind had already been drifting to something, and Laura had hit it dead center. That something was Ichika. *Sometimes he really acts like an old man... Maybe he had been rubbing off on her.* Laura, on the other hand, was definitely not easily influenced.

"Oh, right. There's a park I wanted to check out over that way."

"A park?"

"Yeah. Joushi Park. It's built on the ruins of a castle."

"Oh? Interesting. I'd heard Japanese castles were very defensible. Even if they're just ruins, seeing them should be educational."

Laura, as usual, was looking at it from a military perspective, but Charlotte didn't feel the need to comment on that. Everyone has their own perspective, and it's best to observe it and learn from it rather than force your own.

"We really bought a lot, too. The manager snuck us some pay on the way out, so we could get more than we planned on."

"Oh, was money a question? I could stop by the bank, I have around twenty million euros available."

"You're that rich?!"

"Yeah. I've been in the military practically since birth. And then there's the stipend for national cadets."

*Mine isn't that shabby either, but still...*

"But I don't actually know how to withdraw it. I've never had to use it."

"Well, uh. I see... You've definitely got a lot saved up. I'll have to show you how to spend it."

"Mm. Thanks. But I've just never needed to spend money for myself. Rations and uniforms were enough in the regular army, and when undercover I've been careful to only take things from my handlers. Otherwise, I'd be too easy to pin down."

"You don't have to worry that much about it here. Let's at least get crêpes when we get to the park."

"Huh? Crêpes? Why?"

"While I was on break at the café, someone told me that the berry medley crêpes brought good luck."

"Is that some kind of weird Japanese thing?"

"I think it's just a superstition."

"Oh, folk religion."

Charlotte nodded in affirmation, but looked a little bit exasperated. *You're not wrong, per se, but it's something a bit more girlish...* Anyway, though, Laura was up for it, so Charlotte led her forward. It wasn't hard to find. The area was packed with high school girls, whether they were going out in the evening or coming back from practice.

"Let's order." Charlotte took Laura's hand in both of hers and pulled her toward the crêpe truck. "Could we get two crêpes? Berry medley, please."

The cook, a man in his late 20s with a scruffy beard, a bandana, and an affable expression, bowed his head slightly.

"I'm sorry. We're out of berries today."

"Oh, really? That's too bad. Laura, what else did you want?"

"Mm? Strawberry and grape."

Laura raised two fingers to signal that she wanted one of each, and stepped forward to pay.

"It's okay, Laura. I've got this. After all, I dragged you out here."

"Is that so? Don't worry about it. Plus, I wanted to try spending. How did I do?"

There wasn't a shred of girlishness in her voice, but Charlotte still had to hand it to her for her earnestness.

"100 points."

"I knew it." Laura spoke with self-satisfaction as she took the crêpes. "Which would you like?"

"Well. I'll take the strawberry."

Stepping a bit away from the shop, they found a bench to sit on and dug into their crêpes.

"Mmm! This is delicious!"

"It is. This is my first time eating a crêpe, but I think it tastes good."

Charlotte had been a bit disappointed that she couldn't try the berry medley, but the soft, tasty crêpe brought the joy back to her voice.

"This is great. We're gonna have to come back here, and bring everyone."

"I see. Then, I'll bring Ichika."

"That's no fair!"

Really, though, seeing Laura being so honest about her feeling made Charlotte a bit jealous. *I'd love to come here just with Ichika, too...* She remembered her dream of the week before—the one too embarrassing to mention to anyone—and her cheeks flushed. Trying to hide it from everyone and no one, she ate her crêpe faster. *Ugh... That was just a dream. It didn't really happen. I should just forget it.*

"Charlotte."

"Mm? What, Lau—"

**Smooch.** Laura's lips locked with Charlotte's.

"Wh-Whaaaaaat?!"

"You had some sauce on you."

"S-So what?!"

"My hands were full."

Laura held up the crêpe in her right hand and the bags in her left.

"You could have told me!"

"It was about to fall."

Laura tilted her head at Charlotte, as if unsure why it was a big deal. Like a kitten innocently stepping over the bounds of the heart, was the image that came to Charlotte's mind.

"Whoops."

This time, Laura licked her own hand. Like a cat cleaning its fur.

*Ngh...!* Charlotte's heart was still pounding from Laura's actions. It wasn't that she was seriously falling for another girl, but anyone's heart would skip a beat or two with a beautiful girl their age being so intimate. *She just doesn't understand how what she's doing looks like. I shouldn't blame her for it.* Charlotte was, of course, herself quite beautiful, but people never understand that about themselves.

"Don't be so angry. Here, I'll share mine."

"T-Thank you!"

Hiding her embarrassment, Charlotte took a bite of Laura's crêpe.

"By the way, that crêpe shop doesn't even have a berry medley."

"Eh?"

"It wasn't on the menu. None of the sauces in the kitchen were the right color."

"Oh, really? You're observant."

"Of course I am. What if that was cover for a terrorist? Think of what would happen if he set off a grenade at that range. Even if we emergency deployed our IS, our lives would be in danger."

"...So that's how you were thinking about it."

Charlotte's shoulders drooped in dejection, as her hopes that it was for a more girlish reason were dashed.

"But we can still have berry medley."

"Huh?"

"What flavor is this crêpe?"

"Grape, right?" Seeing the hint of a smile on Laura's face, Charlotte suddenly realized. "Oh! Strawberry and blueberry?"

"Precisely."

Laura, self-satisfied, took a bite.

"But wait, Laura! Blueberries and grapes are different!"

"They're still similar, though. And if I had said 'I want blueberry,' you'd have figured it out."

Now that Charlotte thought of it... The cook's face had lit up when he heard the order, too.

"I see. So that's the hidden meaning behind 'berry medley.'"

Charlotte nodded in realization, embarrassed at her assumption that Laura was just being dense. The shame of mistaken assumptions brought a different blush to her face. *I see... So that's how it is. I'd love to have a berry medley crêpe with my boyfriend...* Charlotte let Laura's actions replay in her mind, with the lead role replaced by Ichika. That would be screening, matinees and evening showings alike, for the next few days.

"Summer's almost over."

"Yeah."

The two didn't have to say what that meant. This summer, not just this summer but this year, was a turning point in their youths. Not just their youths, their whole lives. A time they'd never forget.

Fifteen years old, and in love for the first time.



"What is this?"

"It's adorable, that's what it is! It looks great on you!"

"Don't hug me! I can't move!"

"But cats are for having in your lap!"

"But you're a cat, too."

The excited conversation was taking place in Laura and Charlotte's dorm room. With nothing else to do after dinner, Charlotte had suggested that they change into their new pajamas.

"Are these really pajamas?"

"Yeah. They're comfy, aren't they?"

"How would I know until I sleep in them?"

Laura's suspicion was reasonable. These were pajamas, but certainly not normal ones. The voluminous cut covered the whole body except for the face. Each pair had a hood with cat ears, and the arms and legs ended on paws. In other words, they were cat pajamas.

"I think I'd rather sleep in the nude. That would probably be more comfortable."

"You can't! Plus, these look so good on you. It'd be a shame to take them off."

Laura's outfit was black, while Charlotte's was white. Since they'd changed, Charlotte had had Laura seated in her lap, embracing her from behind. Charlotte, at least, seemed to be enjoying it a lot.

"C'mon, Laura. Why don't you try saying 'meow,' just this once?"

"I refuse! Why should I have to?"

"Because it would be cute! Cuteness is important!"

Charlotte's innocent enthusiasm and happy smile were, to Laura, her greatest enemy. Laura'd been assailed with a storm of 'because it's cute' and 'you have to try it on' and 'sorry, but no saying no,' a complete 180-degree turn from normal. Before she knew what was happening she'd ended up firmly planted in Charlotte's lap.

"C'mon, give it a try! Meow!"

"Me-Meow..."

Charlotte's happiness visually grew as she watched Laura mimic an embarrassed cat. Almost like the displays showing a certain space battleship's main cannon charging.





"You look so cute, Laura! Let's take a picture!"

"And leave evidence behind? I absolutely refuse!"

"Don't complain like that!"

***Knock, knock.***

"Come in!"

Charlotte called out with the happy bluntness only heard in girls' dorms, only for her gleeful grin to turn to an embarrassed blush in an instant.

"Hey. Oh, what's up with those outfits? Black and white cats?"

Their visitor was Ichika.

*Whaaaaaat? He's never ever come here before, so why now? Why today? Why when I'm in cat pajamas? I'm not normally like this! I just bought something cute when I was out shopping today, my normal pajamas are much more mature! I'm not normally like this at all! Charlotte's head spun. Even as she tried to explain, all that came out of her mouth was mumbled 'er's and 'ah's.*

"You called me earlier and I missed it. I was busy with IS stuff all day. Around dinner, I tried to call you back but you didn't answer, so I came to see what was up."

"I see. Hmm. You're quite the attentive bride. I appreciate it."

Laura had slipped from Charlotte's arms as she panicked, and now stood with her hands on her hips but none of her usual menace. The cat ears and paws completely eliminated that. Rather than being intimidating, it just made her even cuter.

"Oh, whoops, I had it on vibrate in my bag. Ahahaha..."

Charlotte, having regained a bit of her composure, pulled her phone out. It was still, though, grasped in the paw of a white cat. The surrealism left Ichika at a loss for what he should focus on, and he tried to hold back a chuckle. *Wait! He's laughing at me! Oh no. He must think I'm such a little kid... Ugh...*

"Matching pajamas, huh? Cute."

Their enthusiasm had rubbed off on Ichika, as his grin revealed.

**"C-Cute?"** Laura and Charlotte replied in unison. The cheeks of both turned red as they pondered what that meant.

"Oh, by the way, I went shopping today and brought you back something."

As he spoke, Ichika pulled out a cookie bag with a large @ printed on the side.

".....?!"

Charlotte and Laura each broke into a nervous sweat as they remembered their work outfits.

*Did Ichika see me? I hope he doesn't think I'm less of a girl.*

*Did he see me in that frilly thing?!*

Ichika's words floated by them as they looked back on their day of work and just wanted to bury their face in their arms and break down.

"So anyway, when I went to @Cruise, it was packed with cops and reporters for some reason. I couldn't even get in. While I was trying to figure out what to do next, this really energetic manager came out and handed out cookies to everyone caught up in whatever happened. I wasn't one of them, but when I tried to tell her, she was already gone. She was muttering about 'corporate' and 'inspection' the whole time. I wonder what was up with her?"

"Oh, really?"

"Something happened?"

Laura had hung onto hope that it was a different location, but soon that hope would fade.

"It sounds like it was a bank robbery. Things have gotten really unsafe lately."

"....."

"The reporters asked someone what happened, and they said that a good-looking maid and butler duo caught the robbers. That sounds like something you'd only see in the movies or on TV."

"Y-Yeah."

"Definitely."

"Sounds awesome, though. I wish I'd seen them."

Both of them gave a start. It seemed almost as if the ears on their pajamas stood up.

*I wish I'd been in the maid outfit...*

*I don't have the courage to admit it was us...*

They each spent so long mulling it over that the chance to own up to it slipped away.

"How about some tea? We can have the cookies, too."

As Ichika spoke, he stepped toward the simple kitchen area of the room.

"Don't worry! I'll get it, you can sit down."

"Huh? Not with those hands, you won't."

It was only when they heard Ichika that Charlotte and Laura realized they had paws.

"These are cocoa cookies. They'd go well with warm milk for the two kittens, wouldn't they?"

"Ah, yeah."

"If you say so."

The two, embarrassed at being called kittens, gave small nods.

"Hey, Ichika... Do you really think these are cute?"

Charlotte couldn't help but ask, but as soon as the words left her mouth she began to fidget her fingers.

"Yeah. They are. The colors are good, too. They match both of you."

"Really? They match?" Charlotte giggled.

"If you say so... I guess. Maybe I *will* wear them once in a while."

Their embarrassment mixed with happiness as Ichika brought them milk and cookies. A secret tea party for three, with hot milk to drink even though it was summer. A wondrous tea party with a black cat, a white cat, and a prince.

# Chapter III: A Midsummer Night's Dream

*Nothing here's changed at all.* It was August. The week of the Bon festival. That weekend, I—Shinonono Houki—chose to visit a certain shrine. Shinonono Shrine. It was there that I lived before moving. There where I had been born. And there where I could honor my ancestors properly.

*It really is just the same.* The plank-floored dojo was just as I remembered it. I'd heard that after we'd moved, a retired police officer began teaching lessons there as a way of giving back to the community. Just like the old saying that swordsmanship began and ended with good manners, the children were helping each other clean up the equipment and the dojo. It seemed like he really had the right idea. There are a lot of people here now. It used to be just me, Chifuyu, and Ichika. My mind drifted back as I looked over the wooden name tags hanging from the wall.

"I'm gonna win today!"

"Nah, no way."

"Gotcha!"

**Clack! Thwack!**

"Tomorrow for sure!"

"You say that every day."

*Wait... Was I really that rude as a kid? And didn't I have any memories of anything else? Maybe just us hanging out together? No matter how hard I tried to dredge them up, nothing came to mind.*

*C'mon, that can't be the only thing that sticks in your mind, me... Can it?* I pulled out my pocket notebook and peeked at a photo I kept inside. It was me and Ichika, in our uniforms. It really brought back memories. Really. By my side was Tabane, and by his was Chifuyu, but I'd folded both sides in and hidden them. Ling had a photo of him folded to make it just the two of them, too. I guess we childhood friends had a lot in common.

"Oh, there you are, Houki."

"Huh?!"

The sudden call surprised me, and I spun around, hiding my notebook behind my back. In front of me was a woman in her mid 40s, with a calm manner and gentle smile matching her age.

"Sorry, Aunt Yukiko. I just got lost in a memory."

"Well, nothing wrong with that. You used to live here, it's only natural to look back."

Her grin was a natural one, without a trace of a sneer behind it. I don't think she'd even once gotten angry at me. Even when I deserved it. "*Well, if you know you did something wrong, isn't that the important part?*" When I heard that, I practically burned with embarrassment. And made very sure not to do whatever it was again. I was not an unruly child.

"Are you sure you really want to help out with the festival?"

"Would I be getting in the way?"

"Of course not. I really appreciate the help. But, Houki. The summer festival isn't every day of the year, you know. Isn't there a boy you'd like to invite?"

"I-I mean..."

I turned bright red as I spoke. Ichika's face suddenly floated to the front of my mind. Aunt Yukiko chuckled gently, understanding from my reaction.

"Well, that's fine too. The Kagura dance begins at six. You should bathe now."

"Of course."

The Shinonono Shrine had long tended toward, to be precise, folk traditions rather than doctrinaire Shinto, and celebrated Bon as well as the new year with Kagura dance. The dance was an offering to both the returning spirits and the gods which bore them across the divide, and a reason for the Shinonono School of Martial Arts' focus on swordsmanship. Precise records had long since been lost to the flames of war, but the shrine's sword for women had long been famous. Even after my family had moved, our relatives had continued to maintain it.

*Nothing changed here either...* I stood in the changing room of my old house. Uninvited, memories of why we'd had to leave welled up. *If she hadn't created the IS...* If she hadn't done that, I could still be here. Right next door to Ichika.

"....."

Scowling, I stripped. But soon my attention was caught by something wrapped around my left wrist. A red cord, perhaps a centimeter across. It twined around me intricately before ending in a pair of bells, one gold and one silver. Akatsubaki in standby mode.

*But she gave me this, too...* The first time in my life I'd ever asked her for something. But she was swift to answer. Remembering the joy which reverberated in her voice, my scowl faded. *What do I even want to do?* Forgive her? Reject her? *I... don't know...* I didn't know. I just didn't know. Each felt in my mind like the truth, and in my heart like a lie.

*Anyway... I need to take my bath.* Before the Kagura dance came ritual purification. Once, this was done only with cold water from a river or well, but as the years passed and this became less acceptable, warm water was adopted to preserve the tradition. And thus, cleansing at the Shinonono Shrine could be accomplished with a bath.

Wearing only Akatsubaki, I stepped into the bath. When I was young, it had been remodeled in cypress. It was just as luxurious as the resort we'd visited on our class trip last month. Perhaps not quite as huge, but easily enough for four people to stretch out their legs.

"Phew..."

It had been years since I'd soaked in this tub, but it felt just as good as it ever had. The water was just a tad hotter than normal, how I liked it.

Hearing the water splash quietly around me as I stretched only underlined the peace it brought to my soul. *Baths are great...* The water washed over my soft skin, and carried me toward utter relaxation. Soon, though, I thought again to the month before...

That night with Ichika, together on the beach. Remembering that our lips were almost close enough to touch, I experimentally ran a finger over mine. *If we had kept going...* We would have kissed. There was no question.

As if I was trying to hide my blush, I sunk in the water up to my nose. Wordless thoughts of joy spilled from my lips and burbled to the surface. *So does this mean... Like, that? If Ichika likes me, and I like him, does that mean we're in love? Ahhhh...* My face turned red all the way up to my temples as the bubble rose to a boil. What could have been one minute, or two minutes, or ten minutes later, my breath ran out and I suddenly stood bolt upright, pushing myself out of the water.

“Ahhh!” It was happy, it was embarrassing, but... It was love. My heart was leaping from emotion to emotion, and somehow, my face was angry. The heat of the bath had nothing to do with how red my face was. *I can't be thinking about this. Maybe some other day, but not one when I have duties as a shrine maiden. I need to focus.* I sank again below the water, air burbling up from my mouth again. “.....”

When I finally left the bath, it was 50 minutes later.



“There. I’m all set.”

In a pure white outfit with hakama, bedecked with gold, I looked more mature than usual. Its mystic air gave me a touch of breathtaking beauty.

“Will you put your lipstick on yourself?”

“Yes. I always have.”

“Oh, right. You’ve been doing this since you were little. The Kagura dance and everything. You were so cute back then.”

“Can you stop bringing up...”

She chuckled, “Oh, sorry. But you’ll be like this when you get old, too.”

I stiffened my expression, as much to hide my embarrassment as anything, and dipped my pinky into the small dish of lipstick. Using the traditional style, rather than a modern stick, was another shrine tradition.

*There... I checked the mirror to make sure I’d applied enough, and was satisfied. Thinking back, I always used to want to do whatever my mom did, and I begged her to let me take part in the Kagura dance too. It’s a bit embarrassing to remember, but really I was more focused on my reflection. Aunt Yukiko’s still great at makeup. I look like a different person. Almost like a— Like a princess. The phrase came to mind unconsciously, and I reddened, this time without the help of any powder. Why do I keep getting carried away with myself... I knew, though.*

“Ahem...” Clearing my throat, I forced myself into a neutral expression. My aunt watched with a smile as she took up the sacred sword from the altar.

"You always used to just have a fan instead of this, though."

"I think I'm old enough now!"

I drew the blade forth. A sword in my right hand, and a fan in my left. The Shinonono School had always fought with one blade to strike and one to dazzle and deceive, so a fan was a natural evolution. Of course, a fan would never be used in real combat, but it captured the defensive style of two-sword fighting using the left hand to block, parry, and entangle while relying on the right to slash, chop, and thrust. Similar to how other styles used a kodachi.

"Come on, Houki, wave the fan for me. I haven't seen you do it in forever."

"Okay. I'll do it once for practice."

Returning the sword to its sheath, I thrust it through my belt. It seemed less like the motion of a dancer and more like that of a true samurai. Only fitting, for a daughter of the Shinonono.

"Now, then."

I opened the closed fan, and let it sway. The bells at either side jingled livelily. Then I thrust myself into the dance as if this were the actual ceremony, with a force of will as if my surroundings stood silent. As I swung the fan from side to side, I dropped into a crouch and spun, bearing my blade. Its razor edge trailed the fan as if floating in its wake. My blossoming beauty combined with all the stoic severity I could muster. I was the very picture of a swordmaiden.





"That should suffice..."

"Oh my. Oh my! That was wonderful, Houki! You must have kept practicing even while you were away."

"Well... Ah... I mean, I am a shrine maiden..."

My aunt's face lit up with joy as I shyly accepted my heritage. I just hoped Ichika never finds out. I had unresolved issues about doing womanly things. *Even back when those boys were making fun of me...*

I was so impressed with him when he stood up for me. I'd always expected him to be the worst of the lot, but that incident really warmed me up to him. But that's why I didn't want him to know.

What set him off then was a group of guys making fun of a girl. Not because it was me. If he ever said that being womanly didn't fit me, I wouldn't be able to handle it. I might even break down crying then and there. So if he were to watch me as I danced, I just wouldn't be able to deal with it. That's why I didn't invite Ichika.

*I mean, it's him. Even if he realizes what day it is, he still wouldn't show up. He'll just tell himself it's no biggie and roll back over on the couch. On the other hand, thinking of it that way just means that I'm not enough to get his attention, doesn't it. Anyway! Whatever! Ichika's not coming! So all I have to focus on is dancing!*



"Yo."

"....."

"Good job."

Ichika came.

*Wait. Wait, wait, wait. This isn't right. This isn't right at all. After the dance, I washed the sweat off, changed into a shrine maiden's outfit, and now I'm selling charms. So what's Ichika doing here? Houki ran back through the events of the past few dozen minutes in a list, trying to get a grasp on the situation.*

"Honestly, I was amazed."

*This is probably a dream, isn't it. There's no way this could be happening in real life.*

"Really, you... You were beautiful."

*Houki's breath caught. In an instant, her face was a bright red, no duller than the color of her hakama. Wh-Whaa? This is a dream. This has got to be a dream. Ichika would never say that to me. I have to be dreaming.*

"THIS IS A DREAM!"

"Wait, what?" Ichika, a bit shocked by the shout, asked waveringly.

"It's a dream. It has to be. Hurry and wake up!"

"Houki! What's wrong? Oh, could that be..." Yukiko, attracted by the commotion, looked over Houki and Ichika. "Oh, it must be."

With a clap of her hands, she reached understanding, as if a light bulb turned on over her head.

"I can handle things here, Houki. Go and enjoy the festival."

"What?! This must be a dream. This can't be happening in real life. So..."

Yukiko, arms folded, watched Houki mumble to herself in shock a bit longer before another light bulb lit up.

"There!"

**Thud.** A sharper karate chop than her gentleness made seem possible.

"Oww!"

"Get a hold of yourself, Houki."

"Ugh..."

Houki rubbed her head as she calmed down. A moment later, Yukiko spun her around and pushed her forward.

"Now, now, hurry up. Go take a shower. I'll lay you out a yukata."

"But..."

"It's okay." Yukiko pushed Houki inside, ignoring her objections. Before she herself left, she turned and spoke to Ichika. "Just hold on a moment. It's a boyfriend's job to wait for his girlfriend."

"Eh?"

She gave the stunned Ichika a quick wink before following Houki inside. With no idea of what was going on, he could only wait as he was told.

◆

*I still can't believe this is happening. As Houki dunked her head into the shower's stream for a third time, she kept repeating her words from before. Ichika came to the festival. I suppose that's not impossible. But still!*

The splashing of water on the shower's floor. A fourth dunk. Droplets of water fell from her raven-black hair, but she paid them no heed. *Ichika, of all people! Just called me beautiful!* A somehow more handsome version of him spoke to her in her mind.

"You're beautiful, Houki."

"W-Wait, Ichika. Didn't you come to look at the fireworks? Yet you're only looking at me..."

"That was just an excuse to be with you."

"I-Ichika..."

"Houki..."

Slowly, their lips drew together, and...

"AGGHG!"

With a loud splash, she dumped a pail of water over her head.

"Houki? That didn't sound good. Are you okay?"

"Yeah! I'm fine!"

It was very much obvious that she wasn't.

"You should hurry up. It's already been thirty minutes."

"What?!" Houki had completely lost track of time, and quickly finished washing. As she dried her hair, she relied on Yukiko to wrap her in the yukata to save time.

"There, done. You look so good in traditional clothing! It's because you have your mother's hair."

"Th-Thanks."

Houki meant the thanks to be both for the compliment and for dressing her, but she wasn't able to keep her nervousness at the outfit out of her voice. It had been years since she had worn a yukata, but her presence in one was still comparable to a magazine cover girl's.

*It works on me... I hope. At least I don't look weird in it,* Houki, with no confidence in her appearance, told herself as she looked in the mirror. A pale blue wave pattern flowed over the yukata, with crimson goldfish as accents. Here and there were silver beads and golden arcs, but as subtle decorations rather than garish splashes, preserving its calm and refreshing look.

"Oh, and bring this with you. I've put your wallet and phone and things inside."

Yukiko passed Houki a cloth pouch. *When did she have a chance to do that?* Was something which Houki wasn't going to ask. Her mother had always described Yukiko as helpful and clever.

"Um, Aunt Yukiko."

"What?"

"T-Thank you..."

Houki's shyness was answered by a quick look of surprise before the smile returned to Yukiko's face.

"You're welcome. Anyway! You can't keep your boyfriend waiting!"

"Wait, he's just—"

"Sure, sure. Now hurry along." Yukiko rushed Houki out of the changing room and toward the foyer. As she glanced at the clock on the wall on the way, she noticed it was already past six. The sunlight had faded to a golden orange. "The fireworks start at eight. You two should find somewhere to watch them together."

"I was saying, he's—"

"Of course. Now have fun."

Houki sighed. She hadn't had time to explain fully, or Yukiko hadn't bothered to listen fully, but either way, her sandals were on and she was on her way out the door. Even more worrying was how Ichika would feel after being kept waiting for an hour.

*What do I do? That took longer than I thought. He probably gave up and went home. And Aunt Yukiko keeps getting us all wrong. How do I explain it?* Walking carefully to keep her hem even, she made for the shrine's arch as fast as she could. That was always where they had waited for each other in the old days.

*Where is he...* The area was already filled with a sea of people when she arrived, and she couldn't find him. Plus, most of them were entering the shrine by passing through, and she didn't want to block their way by

standing under it. *He must have already...* Just as she resigned herself, she felt a tug at her hand.

"You're late, Houki. I've been waiting! Oh, wow— You're wearing a yukata?"

"O-Oh, Ichika. There you are. I didn't notice."

Seeing him unexpectedly for the second time made her lose her words again. *Calm down, Houki. Calm down. Wait... My hand?! He's holding my hand?* Only now did her cheeks flush as she noticed they were holding hands. Fortunately, it had already grown dim, and Ichika didn't notice.

"Huh. I like it. It looks good on you."

"R-Really?! I thought so myself!"

*I-Is he really praising me?!* Houki let Ichika lead her through the crowd as the praise made her nerves jangle like a telephone.

"Anyway, there's a bunch of stuff to go see. I missed out on last year; was too busy with exams."

"....." Houki held a hand to her chest, as if to feel—and to hold back—her heart pounding, as she followed. Her right hand was still in his.

"Cotton candy, yakisoba, corn on the cob, they've got it all. I knew Shinonono Shrine would get this right."

Houki wouldn't have known what to make of that if she had heard it. All she could think was to hope that he couldn't hear the sound of her heart.

"Houki?"

"W-What?!"

Ichika had put his face close to Houki's to be heard in the crowd. Remembering the moonlit night by the sea the month before when they'd almost kissed, she pulled back. His face looked exactly as it had when she'd opened her eyes then.

"Hey, be careful, or you're gonna run into someone."

"Right. Sorry."

"So, where do you wanna go first?"

"Well, uhh."

The hand she'd pulled away suddenly felt lonely. Unable to bring herself to ask to hold hands again, Houki nervously cast the hand behind her back to and fro instead. *We're alone together. Not like we sometimes are at school, but alone. Together. Mmm.* Her joy at the realization was matched with disappointment that they weren't holding hands.

"Hey, aren't you really bad at goldfish scooping?"

"When was the last time you checked? Well?"

"Hm? Have you gotten better then?"

"Of course I have. Don't think I'm always going to be that little girl."

"Let's go, then. Loser buys winner something to eat."

"Perfect. I was about to suggest the same thing."

Houki nodded with crossed arms, and the two set off to find a goldfish scooping stall. It didn't take long before they found one, and each had their payment ready at the same time.

"You're wearing a yukata, Houki. Are you sure that's not going to give you trouble?"

"I'm used to traditional clothing. You don't need to hold back."

"Oh, okay... Then it's on!"

"You know it!"

Their scoops hit the water at the same time.



"Well, uh. Thanks for the yakisoba."

"I don't understand..."

As Ichika chowed down with a grin, Houki sat next to him clutching her fists in resentment. They had been tied three to three at the end, when suddenly, one of Houki's goldfish dove back into the tank. They both had been so surprised at this turn of events that they let their scoops soak through.

"That damned goldfish, ruining our match..."

"That's what they do."

Houki glared even more intently than usual, and Ichika found it wiser to change the topic, "Anyway, you don't have to stay mad. This yakisoba is great. You should try some."

As he spoke, Ichika held up a bite for Houki with the same chopsticks he'd been eating with. *Is this... An indirect kiss...* Trying not to stop the pounding of her heart, Houki snuck a quick glance at Ichika's face.

"Hm?"

It was as nonchalant as ever. Disappointed at the lack of suggestion but pleased by his kindness, Houki opened her mouth wide, waiting for the 'say ahh.'

"Mm. Wow, this is good."

"Isn't it? Plus, you must be hungry after that dance."

"Yeah. I... I guess I am."

She'd forgotten all about it until he brought it up. Still, she hadn't wanted to say anything and move the conversation away from his offer to feed her. *He'd do that for anyone, though.* The realization made her heart ache a little. *I want that to only be for me...* Houki was truly a 16-year-old in love.

"I'm a little thirsty."

"Oh, yeah. It's so hot here because of the crowd. Should we get something to drink?"

"Okay." Houki nodded, though her blush wasn't from the heat at all.

*All right, now I'll just take his hand.* With the eyes of a duelist waiting to draw, Houki watched Ichika's hand. And then, the moment came. *And, and... Now!*

"Huh? Ichika, is that you?"

"Huh?"

As Ichika turned toward the voice, Houki's hand grasped air. Hiding her failure, she quickly brought it around to adjust her hair. *Who! Who's butting in now?!*

"Oh, Ran."

*What? Who's this?* It was no surprise that she didn't know the person, but Houki was still unsettled that Ichika did.

"Didn't expect to see you here."

"Oh, yeah. I've been running into way more people than I expected. Where's Dan?"

"I dunno. Probably laying around at home."

Ran, like Houki, was also in a yukata. Her hair was let down in complex braids rather than held up by its usual hairband.

"I've never seen you in a yukata before. I always think of you in western clothing, but that looks good on you too."

"Oh, really? Thanks."

Ran looked at her feet to hide her blush. Meanwhile, Houki's jealousy alarms screamed.

"Wow, Prez is blushing. She never does that."

"Oh, this must be why she's never seemed interested in boys from other schools *or* any of us."

"Good luck, Prez!"

From behind Ran, a group of other girls in yukata spoke.

"What's wrong with you guys?!"

"Oh, now she's mad."

"Must have touched a sore spot."

"Scary!"

Ran took a deep breath to fire back at them, but before she could, Ichika interrupted, "Are these friends from your school?"

"They're, uh, the rest of the student council..."

Ran stumbled over her words as Ichika stepped up next to her. The four girls accompanying her exchanged grins as they continued.

"We came to get ideas for our autumn festival."

"Where better to learn about festivals than at one?"

"But we were about done, anyway."

"Eh? Since wh—" Ran's eyes widened at this new revelation. They must have conversed through eye contact in the way that only teenage girls could.

"All right, Prez."

"We're leaving now."

"See you at school!"

"Adieu!"

"Wait, hold on!"

The four disappeared into the crowd with a speed surprising for yukata-wearers. Left behind were Ran, halfway through raising her hand to point at them; Ichika, standing beside her; and shortly behind the two Houki, whose displeasure meter was rising rapidly.

"They, uh, they like messing with people."

"Oh, I know the type."

"But they don't actually mean it. You know?!" Ran had been so intent on defending them for some reason that she only now noticed that Ichika had stepped up next to her. "S-Sorry!"

Stepping away, she spun around, her face even redder than before.

"Ah... Ahem!" Houki cleared her throat, trying to claw Ichika's attention back.

"Oh, sorry. You haven't been introduced, have you. This is Gotanda Ran. Remember, I told you about Dan? She's his little sister."

"Hello, I'm Gotanda Ran."

Ran gave Houki a businesslike bow. At that moment, Houki became sure that she was a rival in love.

"And this is Shinonono Houki. My first childhood friend. I think I've told you about her?"

"No, just mentioned her name."

"Really? Anyway, I hope you two get along. Right, Houki?"

"Sh-Shinonono Houki. Pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you."

Another businesslike greeting, and then the air fell silent for a few seconds. Within each of their hearts, meanwhile—

*Ichika made her sound like some kind of samurai. He never said she was this pretty. And why does she have to have such big boobs?*

*Not into your friend's sister, huh, Ichika? Well, she's into you. And... I know I'm not as cute... Ugh, this is frustrating.*

Both turned their eyes to Ichika, waiting for him to break the ice.

"....."

"....."

Ichika was a bit embarrassed by the sudden serious stares.

"W-What?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all."

Their answers were brief, and their eyes remained fixed.

"Oh." Ichika clapped his hands together, but his next words only sharpened their glares. "Why don't we walk around together?"

With her hopes now thoroughly shattered, Houki stalked silently, her head slumped forward. Ran, meanwhile, had received even more praise than hoped and her expression glowed.

"See, her friends ditched her. Unless you want to go home too, Ran?"

"No, I'll stay! I'd love to walk around together!"

Near-astonishment showed on Ichika's face as Ran grasped his hand. His own reaction reminded Ran of what she herself was doing, and she blushed as she pulled her hand back.

"All right, let's look around then."

"Of course."

"Whatever..." Houki's glum resignation was the mirror image of Ran's joy.

They walked side by side, with Houki on Ichika's left and Ran on his right. As they made their way through the packed summer festival, they passed families here, groups of friends there, and of course couples.





*This is my chance! I almost never get this close to Ichika! And my stupid brother isn't here to ruin it either! Even if I've got a serious rival... I've gotta do my best! Ran pumped herself up as she stole glances at Ichika's face.*

*Ugh... I'm used to him being a blockhead, but this is really pushing it... I mean, going out of his way to compliment someone else's yukata too? I could kill him right now...*

Houki couldn't let go of her anger. But at the same time, her naïvete pushed her in the other direction. *On the other hand, I'm the one who just got an ind— An indirect... kiss...* It may seem like only a handful of solace, but for Houki the handful alone would be enough. She brought her own together as if to cradle it.

"Didn't you used to come to these with Dan, Ran?"

"I guess. Dad always said it was dangerous for a girl to go alone, so he made me drag him along."

*"Then, that was how I met you," she added in a whisper.*

Deep within her heart, a little voice reminded her of the day she first fell in love, gently and joyously, harmoniously and passionately. *Maybe, just for today, I can be a little bit bolder.* With another whisper of "Go for it!" she reached her hand toward Ichika's again.

**Thud.**

"Wha—"

"Sorry!"

"No, I'm sorry, I wasn't looking."

Ran nodded her head apologetically at the passerby she'd bumped into.

"Are you okay, Ran?"

"Ah....."

Ichika had, when Ran tipped off balance, instinctively pulled her toward his chest. Meaning, she was wrapped in her crush's arms. For a teenaged girl's heart, more delicate than Mozart's piano sonatas and more vivid than Vivaldi's concertos, it was too much.

"Eh... Ah... I...!"

Ran's hands flapped back and forth, meaninglessly, as her mental circuits overloaded.

"Hm?"

"Ah, ah... That!"

Ran thrust her finger in the direction of a shooting gallery. Of course, only to disguise what she really meant.

"Oh, are you good at that?"

"Yeah, well, kind of."

*Afraid that Ichika would be able to hear the pounding of her heart, she pretended to adjust her yukata as an excuse to step back from him. Did I really just embarrass myself like that? Ugh... I never realized how muscular*

*he was until—enough about that! It's time for the shooting gallery! I need to show off!*

“Okay, why not then? ...Hmm? C’mom, Houki, don’t go too far away or we’ll get split up.”

Lightly grasping Houki’s hand, he led her and Ran toward the shooting gallery. It’s likely that he had no way of knowing what was going through each of their hearts.

“Step right up!”

“Three plays, please.”

“Well, well. Looks like you’ve got your hands full today, pal! No freebies, then!”

“Aww, c’mon. At least for the girls?”

“Gahahaha. Not happening.” The attendant, whose white T-shirt’s sleeves were rolled up to reveal the rippling muscles of his tanned arms, gave a wild grin. Ichika found him amusing enough, and paid for all three plays. “You’re welcome, champ. I like your style, y’know? Not many kids your age know how to treat a lady.”

“You’re telling me. That’s why I deserve a disc—”

“No way, not in a million years. Can’t subsidize the competition, now, can I? Bwahaha.” He may have been friendly, but there was still no room for negotiation.

Ichika, Ran, and Houki each lifted their airguns and loaded them with cork pellets.

“.....”

Ran carefully aimed hers with the steely gaze of a sniper. Her aura was as sharp and unapproachable as a stiletto. *I’m a terrible shot...* She regretted her choices of a few moments ago. Her spur-of-the-moment claim had dug her own grave.

“Wow, you look like the real thing. Good luck!”

“Yeah.” She nodded laconically, not wanting to break her own concentration.

*Argh! This is all wrong! I’m terrible at it! But the longer she took to set up her shot, the more even the other bystanders became as expecting as Ichika was. Just go ahead and shoot! What’s the worst that can happen, having to go ‘I lied, I actually don’t know how. Can you show me?’ That’ll work! I’ll just have to settle for that!”*

He might even have to guide her into proper posture. She’d seen on TV the kind of training he would have gone through at IS Academy, so— Her mind filled with a fog the color of pink grapefruit as the cork shot forth with a bang.

“Ah—”

“Oh?”

“Ooh!”

**Thwap. Thud.**

“You shot down the dog tag?! You win a flat-screen TV!”

"Eh? Ehh? Eh...?"

Ran's aimless shot had somehow struck the smallest target, and the booth attendant somehow seemed even more excited than the rest of her audience or even Ichika.

"Amazing, young lady! I thought I had that nailed up there—uh, I mean, never mind!"

"Ahh..."

"I'm impressed enough that you set your eyes on the flat-screen TV. Even more that you got it. Incredible!"

Ichika was clapping as if legitimately impressed. The surrounding crowd joined in, as even more began to rubberneck at the commotion.

"Gahahaha. You're stealing the shirt off my back today! Take it and get outta here!"

"Th-Thanks."

The package was bulky, but not so large that a middle school girl couldn't carry it, and Ran took it.

"That was perfect!"

"If you say so..."

A question mark seemed to hover over Ichika's head as he pondered Ran's sudden disappointment, before he turned to Houki.

"Ugh..." Her fifth and final shot had missed the mark.

"You were never any good at this, were you."

"Shut up! If this was a bow I'd have made every shot!"

"And put an arrow through each of the prizes while you did it. Jeez."

Ichika handed his own gun, with shots still remaining, to Houki. "See, your problem is that you're holding it wrong. You need to straighten your arms like this, and make sure that you're looking straight down the sights."

"....."

As he spoke, he reached out and touched Houki to gently pull her into the proper stance, and beneath her sour scowl, her emotions began to run wild. *Waaaaait! Too close, too close! You're touching me! I can feel you breathing on my face! Get back—* Was not what she wanted.

"See, like this. Think you've got it?"

"Okay."

"Give it another try then. Ready, aim..."

"I know!" As she snapped back, she pulled the trigger while barely realizing it.

**Thwap. Thump.**

"Oh! And a stuffed animal for you!"

Her prize was a rather large penguin, all face, big enough to be used as a cushion. Its innocent gaze almost seemed to be protesting its use at target practice.

"You're not half bad either, miss! Looks like I'm going hungry tonight!"

"Actually... I wanted the daruma next to it..."

"Huh?"

“Oh, nothing.”

Houki took the plush, with a surprisingly contented grin on her face even though she'd missed her choice of prize.



“Ran's taking a really long time.”

“I guess.”

They had walked the night market, playing and eating. The time was almost eight o' clock, and the fireworks were about to begin.

“I hope she didn't get lost.”

Ran had left the shrine grounds for a few minutes, having decided the TV was too much to carry around, and called Dan to get him to come pick it up. Ichika and Houki both felt it would've been too awkward to tag along, so they waited by the water fountain—and kept waiting. Just as Ichika was about to go look for Ran, his phone rang.

“Hi, Ichika?”

“Yeah. What's up, Ran? Did you get lost?”

“No way!”

“Hahaha, I was just kidding.”

“Hmph...”

Ichika laughed off the half-feigned indignation he'd seen used many times on Dan.

“Anyway, well... Dan already found me...”

“Oh, Dan's here too? Why don't we all hang out?”

“He's being really, really insistent that we leave right now.” Ran let out a defeated sigh as she complained. “So I'll be heading home now.”

“Oh, okay. Take care!” Ichika hung up and turned back to Houki. “Ran's leaving.”

“Oh!”

Houki felt a pang of shame at the enthusiasm obvious in her voice. *I'm so terrible...* The more she thought about it, the more it turned into embarrassment, and she cast her eyes downward as she twiddled her fingers.

“Anyway, let's go.”

“Ah...”

Ichika firmly took her by her hand and led her toward the wooded area behind the shrine. *Somewhere we can be all alone... Nah, that can't be what he's thinking.* Ichika would never be that forward. Plus, there was a special spot they both knew about with a perfect view for fireworks. Somewhere out amongst the pines, where the foliage opened up above like a window on the sky. No matter what the season, whether the glow of spring dawn or the sparkle of summer fireworks, the luminous harvest moon or the quiet beauty of falling snow, its beauty was framed there like a picture. Only Chifuyu and Tabane, and Houki and Ichika, knew it.

“Wow, it's still just like I remember back here, too.”

Houki was too lost in thought to hear Ichika's words. The evening cries of the crickets washed over her in the deserted woods. A cool wind carried away the summer heat. Being alone with one's crush in a place like this was almost making her lose her mind. *It's only me and Ichika here... It feels... It feels so good...*

Houki peered over at Ichika, half-expectantly. But, true to himself, he was just gazing up at the sky excitedly. *M-Maybe this is my chance to tell him how I feel?* If anyone asked her, she'd surely give that advice.

"Find out how I really feel..."

*Mmmm?* She stared at Ichika. Her face reddened, and she broke out in a sweat that had nothing to do with the heat. *I can say it.*

*I should say it.*

*I just have to say it.*

*Now's the time to say it...*

*Say it... NOW!*

*She repeated to herself over and over, trying to work up the nerve. In her mind, an army of tiny Houkis tried to kick one hesitant one forward. Do I have to say it? Me? Do I have to be the one? Isn't it supposed to be the guy? But it's Ichika. He never would. Does he not like me? No! He has to! I know he has to! I just know it...*

As she argued with herself over and over, her face turned a deeper blush. The sound of the festival crowds was far away, and she couldn't hear it anymore. *Now's the time!* Houki had found her courage, and opened her mouth to speak.

"I-Ichika!"

"Hm?"

"I-I lo—"

## **BOOOOOOM!**

"Huh? Ooh, the fireworks are starting!"

"I lo....."

"Mm? What's up, Houki?"

"....."





Houki hid her clenched fists behind her. *Ugh... Interrupted by the fireworks...* She felt miserable, but there was no way around it. It was her fault for not saying it before they started. The festival's fireworks display was famous for its never-ending barrage. Once it began, the roar of explosions would fill the sky for over an hour. *Maybe today isn't the day...* *Sigh...* The thought drained her emotion, and the passion which had welled up in her ebbed away.

"Wow, this is amazing."

The bursts of light in the sky illuminated the smile on Ichika's face. Seeing that look of innocent joy, Houki couldn't help but want to laugh. *Just being by his side is good enough.* She looked up at the sky with him. Bursts of red and blue, green and yellow enthralled.

"It's beautiful..."

"It really is."

Gazing at the heavens, she regained a little bit of courage, and reached out and took his hand.

"Mm? What?"

"Just let me."

"Okay, fine."

She looked over at him, and back at the sky. Houki's face glowed under the light of the fireworks, not from shyness, but from pride. Her summer memories of her sixteenth year were bathed in vibrant flame.

# Chapter IV: Quintet in Disharmony

“.....”

Her heart pounding, she looked again at the nameplate. Charlotte took a deep breath as she read the word “Orimura” over and over. *It's okay. He told me he'd be here, so it's not like I'm bothering him by dropping by... I think... I hope...*

Charlotte wasn't standing in a dorm hallway, but on a residential street. As she stared at the doorbell, she could feel the sun beating down on her blonde hair. *Ahh, it's so sunny out today... No! I can't get distracted by that!* Her finger hovered over the button as she was, in fact, distracted by that. As she stood, her will wavering, she heard a voice.

“Charl? What's up?”

“Fwah?!”

She spun around in something a little more than a panic to face the voice behind her. It was Ichika, carrying a bag from the local hardware store.

“Ah, uh, hello! It's so sunny out today— No, wait!”

“Huh?”

“Er, um, uh...” As she sputtered, she searched the bookshelves of her mind for something to say. An entire team of 25 mini Charlottes, all frantically tearing through the card catalogue. “Ahhh—”

“Ahhh?”

“Ahhh, there you are.” She gave a cheery smile, and immediately regretted it.

*Agh! I look like such a dweeb!*

“Oh. Anyway, come in! Sorry if it's a mess.”

“I-I can? I can come in?”

“Of course. Why would I turn you away? Or did you have something else planned?”

“N-No! No way! Not at all! Absolutely nothing!” Ichika was a little bit taken aback by her insistence. Noticing, she blushed and turned away.

“Really, I didn't...”

“Hahaha. You're so weird sometimes. Anyway, come on in. Hold on, I'll get the door.”

“Okay.”

Charlotte nodded even as, internally, she wanted to curl up into a ball from embarrassment at the description. Still, though, the excitement of visiting Ichika washed that feeling away. *So this is Ichika's house...* As she stepped inside, she realized two things: that this was her first time going to a boy's house, and that her heart rate had climbed through the roof.

“It's really hot today. Sit down, I'll get you a drink.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Charlotte sat down on the sofa and looked around the living room. Ichika's house was a normal Japanese-style home, with an open plan

between the living room and kitchen. Chifuyu had picked up used furniture on the cheap, so it was a bit out of fashion. But Ichika had worked his hardest keeping the place clean until he moved into the dorms, so even though it was old, it certainly wasn't beat up.

*Wow. He really is handy around the house.* Thinking back to her classmates in elementary school, she couldn't remember any French boys who were the same. Charlotte appreciated it. *Ichika's probably going to make a great husband someday. A husband, huh...* The word sprang to mind unsummoned, and carried with it thoughts of her own future marriage. As her cheeks flashed red, her expression blanked.

"Here, here's some iced tea."

Her heart pounded.

"I made it this morning so it's probably pretty weak, sorry."

"Y-Yeah. Thanks anyway."

Charlotte, yanked back to reality, quickly raised it to her lips to hide the grin she broke out in as Ichika sat down next to her. The tea was a bit weak, but she didn't mind, or didn't even notice in her excitement. *I'm alone with Ichika... I'm alone with Ichika...* Her heart beat faster and faster. *I need to say something... What do I say...*

**Ding-dong!** Just then, the doorbell rang.

"Oh, must be the mailman. I'll go get it."

"Mm."

As Ichika rose and disappeared down the hall, Charlotte took another deep breath. She couldn't let herself panic. Casting back and forth for a topic to use at the next opportunity, she soon settled on something. *You know, I wonder what his hobbies are. I should ask.*



Ten minutes prior.

"This positively has to be it."

Cecilia looked between the maps app on her phone and the nameplate on the door. It read 'Orimura.' She was in the right place. *Bwahaha. My sources in class told me Ichika would be at home today. What a splendid chance to be alone together! And if we're alone, then we can—* As Cecilia thought of the implications, her face flushed red. *We can, if the mood is right, maybe we can...* For reasons she didn't understand, images of her sitting on Ichika's bed next to him filled her mind. And the thoughts of what would happen next made her glow even brighter.

"It's only natural, Cecilia. We're in love."

"I... I can't... I don't know if my heart is ready..."

"I'll make sure your heart and body are both ready."

"Ahh..."

*Wouldn't that be just perfect if it actually happened?* Tossing her phone back and forth in her hands, Cecilia reached toward the doorbell to make her fantasies a reality. *I should clear my throat, too.*

"Ah— Ahem."

With throat clear, she pressed the button. A chime sounded, and a couple dozen seconds later, after the sound of footsteps, the door opened.

"Hello? Oh, Cecilia?"

"Hello there! How are you this fine afternoon? I was passing through the neighbourhood, so I simply had to pay a call."

She tried to keep her words and tone as cool, almost haughty as ever, but her emotions were anything but. *He... He looks even better than normal in street clothes... I'm wearing my good perfume today, I hope he notices too.* The excitement in her heart shone through in her voice.

"Oh. Anyway, come in!"

"My pleasure. Oh, and I've brought something from a patisserie which I've heard is simply marvelous."

"Oh, thanks. I should probs make some tea then."

"That would be wonderful."

Cecilia's glee was palpable as she stepped inside. Slipping on a pair of guest slippers, she walked in toward the living room.

"Charl, Cecilia came over too."

"**Eh?**"

Charlotte and Cecilia's gasps overlapped perfectly. Each was caught completely off guard. Cecilia in particular, who had failed to notice Charlotte's shoes by the door, clamped her mouth shut, wanting to say something but not wanting to say what she had in mind.

"Let's check out that cake. Ooh, three pieces! It's pretty hot today, so iced tea's okay, right? Just gimme a minute."

"O-Of course..."

"Oh, and feel free to take a seat."

Cecilia brusquely plunked down next to Charlotte.

"....."

"....."

They had nothing to talk about—was the furthest thing from the truth, but neither one wanted to speak up first. From the kitchen came the clatter of plates.

"What a coincidence, Charlotte."

"Yeah, what a coincidence, Cecilia."

In response came a pair of awkward chuckles.

"....."

"....."

The silence continued.

*What's Charlotte doing here? Wait, is she trying to steal a march on me?*

*Ugh, Cecilia's here? I thought we'd finally get to be alone... I should've come earlier...*

The study of two drastically different blondes seated side by side would make wonderful art, but sadly, there was neither a painter nor a photographer at Ichika's house that day.

"Sorry about the wait. So, who wants which piece?"

Along with the iced tea, Ichika had set out the cake Cecilia brought—one slice of strawberry shortcake, one of layered cheesecake, and a pear tart.

"Cecilia, you brought them, you should get to pick first." As he spoke, Ichika pulled a chair out of the kitchen and sat down in it.

**—He could just sit on the sofa...**

The sofa sat four, and each of the girls had an open space adjacent to them. Yet Ichika's firm sense of how to be a gracious host shattered each of their dreams.

"So, Cecilia, which one do you want?"

He laid out a pair of cloth coasters before placing glasses of iced tea on them. The ice cracked and popped as it melted in the hot tea.

"I suppose I'll have the tart, then."

"Gotcha. What about you, Charl?"

Ichika turned to her as he passed Cecilia the plate with the tart. It seemed like he just defaulted to assuming he'd get to pick last.

"You can go ahead and go first, Ichika. I'm fine being last."

"C'mon, don't say that. You're the guest."

Charlotte sighed at having to make a decision, but quickly acquiesced to Ichika's insistence, "Then... How about the strawberry one?"

"Oh? Okay, here you go."

"Thanks. And thank you, Cecilia."

"Oh, it was nothing."

*Cecilia's half-smirk made Charlotte feel even more embarrassed about having brought nothing. I was so excited about visiting Ichika that I lost track of everything else... Charlotte had already been starting to spiral downward into self-recrimination, and this only pushed her further. What if he decides I'm just an airhead? He probably already thinks that... Ugh, picking the strawberry cake probably made me look like a little kid, too...*

While Charlotte stared at her cake, lost in thought, Ichika and Cecilia dug in.

"What's wrong? Aren't you going to have any?"

"Eh? Ah, yeah! I am! See?"

Charlotte lopped off the tip of her slice with her fork and took a bite. A delicious but not overpowering sweetness spread through her mouth as the cream melted smoothly. The sponge cake itself was airy but tender, and with a noticeable dash of liqueur.

"This is really good! Where's you get it?"

"Lip Trick, in the underground mall by the station. I was lucky enough to get there early today, it's normally so crowded."

As she listened, Charlotte felt even more guilty. Thinking of how Cecilia had probably expected to share it just with Ichika, she felt almost apologetic.

"Yeah. This stuff's great. There's no way I'd be able to make it at home."

"You're a good cook in your own right, but I can't disagree. The pâtissier is a master. He's been awarded at an international concours," Cecilia chuckled to herself, boastingly.

Ichika let out an 'ooh' before thinking for a little bit and speaking again, "Hey, why don't we all share? Don't you two want to try a little of each?"

"Eh? Well, um..."

"Like when we fed each other?"

Two forks froze, and two gazes locked inquisitively onto Ichika, who gave an unhesitant nod.

"Sure."

".....!"

Each of their faces filled with joy, shining as if bathed in heavenly light.

"You don't have to, I know it's probably icky eating something a boy took a bite of."

"Ah, no! I was just thinking that I'd like to try the cheesecake!"

"Of course not! Here, have a try of mine!"

With a moment's eye contact as firm as a diplomat's handshake, the two shucked off their own not-so-ancient rivalry and entered an Entente Cordiale. There may as well have been 'Congratulations!' typeset in glowing letters behind them.

"Let's try Ichika's first."

"Indeed. If you could cut me a piece?"

Charlotte and Cecilia opened their mouths like hatchlings waiting to be fed. A bit shyly. A bit hesitantly. With fingers clenched to hold back the pounding of their own hearts. Like a princess waiting for a kiss from their prince.

"All right, Cecilia first then. Say ahh."





Ichika, the blockhead of blockheads, failed to notice. Cutting off a bit of cake with his fork, he raised it to Cecilia's mouth.

"Mmm."

By the time she bit into her piece, Cecilia could no longer taste it. Her heart was beating so hard that she could barely catch her breath.

"How is it?"

"It... It's wonderful," she giggled happily. Her face had broken out into a full smile, not even so much at the cake as at her own joy.

"How about me?"

"Oh, sorry. Say ahh!"

"Mm..."

Charlotte closed her eyes and let the sensation wash over her as the cheesecake melted on her tongue. What she enjoyed most, though, were the feelings in her heart. This was the second time she'd been fed by Ichika, but this time was much more intense. Perhaps due to her own emotional changes more than anything.

"It's good. I love it."

Not necessarily what she'd been expecting to say she loved this morning, but.

"All right, now it's my turn."

Ichika's reach with his fork was immediately halted as their voices turned partway to screeches.

"Wait right there!"

"It would be rude to make you cut your own after you fed us."

"Really? I'm fine with it."

"Indeed it would."

"It's too delicious not to."

Each giggled, and lifted a fork loaded with a bite of their cake to Ichika's mouth.

**"Say 'ahh!'"**

Unable to take both at once, he continued in the same order as before, starting with Cecilia. The sweet yet tangy flavor of the pear in the crisp tart crust would have been enough alone, but the jelly coating added something even more in taste and mouthfeel. After cleansing his palate with iced tea, he took a bite of Charlotte's shortcake.

"These are really, really good."

"Yeah. I'm going to have to go there myself sometime."

The delight was clear in their voices even as they lifted their glasses of iced tea to keep Ichika from seeing their grins.

"You know, you two are here really early. It's barely even ten."

"Yeah. You'd said you were an early waker, so I thought maybe it was okay."

"Yeah, it's fine. But what about you? It's summer vacation, shouldn't you be hanging out with friends?"

"No, no, it's fine. No one's schedules matched up today, so I would have just been sitting around."

"Oh my, what a coincidence. It was the same for me. I certainly didn't plan on this."

"Oh really."

Each had canceled all of their plans for today in favor of this, but neither was willing to admit to it. Neither wanted to be the kind of girl who got that excited to go back to a boy's place with him.

*I... I just don't want to seem that matter of fact about it...*

*It simply wouldn't do to for Ichika to think of me as unladylike.*

So both simply passed it off as a rare stroke of luck.

"Well, now what? There's not really anything to do here. Wanna go somewhere?"

"Nah, it's fine! It's too hot out there anyway, let's just stay in."

"Agreed! Perhaps we can see your room?"

"My room? Why do you want to see that?"

That was a hard one to answer, but aside from being able to pilot IS, Cecilia and Charlotte were just normal girls. Of course they'd want to see where their crush grew up.

"Ah well, whatever. You're gonna be disappointed, though."

"Of course we won't!"

"Yeah!"

"Okay..."

Ichika backed down in the face of their shared insistence.

"Let's go do that, then. I'm upstairs."

The two nodded even more intently than they had been doing, and followed Ichika, matching his pace. Like a normal Japanese home, the stairway made a 90-degree turn partway through its course. This was the first time Cecilia had climbed such a staircase, and her interest was matched with a comparison of its crampedness to her own home.

*Clever, but one would have a devil of a time carrying tea service up it.*

Charlotte, on the other hand, felt right at home. Before her father had taken her in, the home she shared with her mother was as similar in spirit as it was different in style. *I'd rather live in a place like this than some mansion any day. It feels like a home, not just a house.*

"Here we are. Oh, and that's Chifuyu's room. Go in there uninvited and she'll probably kill you."

"Ahh... So that's..."

"I see... I suppose it's only natural that Ms. Orimura lives here."

Charlotte and Cecilia both laughed it off nervously. Since the class trip the prior month, both had felt like they were on even thinner ice than normal with her.

*"I'll make it clear right now, I won't let you have him."*

Those were some stark words, and they struck fear into the heart of everyone who'd heard them.

*She's simply being an overprotective big sister... right?*

*Umm... If we're competing with Ms. Orimura, we have no chance...*

Ichika raised an eyebrow at their involuntary gasps.

"What? Did you change your minds?"

"Of course not. What was the saying, no guts, no glory?"

"Yeah. In for a penny, in for a pound."

"Huh?" Ichika raised an eyebrow again at the unexpected answers as he opened the door to his room. "It's pretty cramped, but come in."

"Of course."

"I hope we're not intruding or anything."

With their pulses racing, Cecilia and Charlotte stepped into his room. Squinting in the bright light from the window on the far wall, the first thing they really noticed was the smell of a boy's room. Not quite sweat, more of a musk.

"I've only got one chair in here, so feel free to sit on the bed."

**—On his bed?**

A sudden electronic ringing broke their concentration. **Ding-dong.**

"Huh, someone else is at the door. Hold on, let me go answer it."

Ichika walked back down the stairs again.

"....."

"....."

Charlotte and Cecilia, left alone in the room, eyed the bed without making a move.

*So that's Ichika's bed.*

*Mm, this is different from just being in his dorm room.*

A few moments later, they heard footsteps echo up from below.

"Cecilia, Charl, come downstairs."

**"Ehh?"**

The disappointment at not even having ten minutes was audible in each of their voices.

"Why?"

"We wanted to stay here a little longer."

"Well, um..." The sound of steps on the stairway cut him off.

"Ichika, what are you— Oh."

Ling opened the door behind them. She'd visited Ichika at home many times in elementary and middle school, and didn't hesitate to show herself in. But she wasn't expecting to see them at all, and froze stock-still.

"What the hell are you two doing?"

Ling's blood rushed to her head as she shouted loud enough to be heard from below, and shouts rose back from the first floor in response.

"What? What's the matter?"

"Infiltrators?"

Houki and Laura had arrived as well. That was when Cecilia and Charlotte both gave up on their hopes of anything more happening.



"You know, I don't mind if you're gonna show up, but one of you should've warned me."

"I didn't even know I'd be free today until this morning."

"Yeah. What's the problem with just showing up, anyway? Did you have to hide your porn or something?"

Houki and Ling picked at their chilled soba as they answered. With the large crowd, lunch was quick and easy noodles.

"I was busy buying the cake."

"I'm sorry. I didn't even think of it."

Cecilia and Charlotte nibbled at theirs, served without wasabi. All five understood that, just like themselves, the others had wanted to just drop by casually.

"I'd hoped to surprise you by arriving without warning. Doesn't it make you happy?" Laura asked matter-of-factly as she dipped another noodle in the sauce.

***—I'm jealous of how forward she can be, echoed four thoughts in unison.***

"So, what did you want to do this afternoon? No one wanted to go out, so I guess just stay here?" Five heads bobbed as if attached to the same marionette string.

*I went to all this trouble to find a day when you'd be home.*

*Are you crazy? Why would I waste it somewhere else?*

*I'd simply love to find out something new about you.*

*I still don't know what your hobbies are.*

*I'm interested in seeing where Lehrerin Orimura lives, too.*

Houki, then Ling, Cecilia, and finally Charlotte and Laura thought as they finished their noodles.

"Hold on a minute, I'll make some tea."

"I'll help out, if you don't mind."

"You sure? You're a guest, I don't want to impose. I guess clear the table, then?"

"Sure! No problem."

Charlotte, with her impeccable timing, volunteered for the cleanup. Ling and Cecilia, sensing danger, responded by standing in unison.

"I'll help too!"

"I'm not particularly familiar with this, but if I could help, I insist!"

"Nah, you two can take a load off. Four would be a crowd," replied Ichika.

"Hmph..."

"But..."

They seemed inclined to persist, but realizing that doing so would only do the opposite of what they wanted, they both sat back down on the sofa simultaneously. As an aside—it was Ling, Cecilia, Charlotte, and Laura on the sofa, while Ichika and Houki sat on cushions on the floor.

"Should I wash these?"

"Yeah. The sponge and dish soap are right there. You really sure you want to, though?"

"It's fine. I'm good at washing up, and... honestly, I *like* it."

Charlotte put a little bit of extra emphasis on 'like,' but the embarrassment of doing so made it so muted that the others couldn't really tell.

*It feels almost like we're newlyweds...*

The others glowered at Charlotte's joyous smile.

*Hmm... I definitely can't let down my guard around her.*

*Ugh, dammit, she beat me to it.*

*Perhaps I should try that angle as well.*

*Hm. She's quite cunning.*

With Charlotte's help, the cleanup was done in barely any time at all, and 15 minutes later they were all gathered around the table.

"Green tea's the best after a meal. It really relaxes you." It was hot tea in summer, but Ichika preferred it that way. Cold tea before the meal, hot after. "So, what did you all want to do? There really isn't much here."

"I figured it'd still be like that, so I brought some things over. Here."

Ling lifted a bag, overflowing with everything from playing cards to hanafuda, Monopoly to Life, and more, onto the table.

"Oh, right. I remember you being into board games."

"Of course I am, I can win at this kind." Rin's self-satisfied bragging was an attempt to paper over her terrible record in video games.

"Why don't we play one, then? Anyone have any preferences?"

At Ichika's prompting, everyone began looking through the bag.

"Oh, there's plenty of foreign games too."

"Hey, I remember this one. It's the one where you trade wood."

"This one uses traditional Japanese cards. They're beautiful. I think I'm going to send a copy back to my squad as a souvenir."

"I'd normally be fine with shogi, but that's only good for two people."

The girls were excited by the sheer variety of games. As he watched, Ichika thought back to middle school and remembered how Ling had always been the life of the party.

"Let's pick one everyone can play."

Ichika's suggestion was a game called 'Barbarossa.'

"Oh, one from Germany?"

Laura's arms were crossed, but her interest was obviously piqued by the German flag on the box.

"What kind of game is it?"

"You make statues out of plasticine, then everyone else tries to guess what they are."

"So, the more artistically talented you are, the better?"

"Nah. It's almost the other way around, you don't get any points if someone guesses it right away. You're better off if people can't figure it out at first."

"At first? So you do have to be kind of good at it?"

"It depends on the questions. As long as they can figure it out from your answers, you're fine. The question part of the game is more important than the sculpting."

Ling and Ichika, who were familiar with the game already, explained the rest of the rules, and then they began sculpting.

"I'm done."

"Let's get started then."

Charlotte rolled the die to begin the game.

"One, two, three."

"You get an elfstone."

"I landed on a question square. All right, Laura, it's about yours."

"Go ahead."

"Remember, you have to answer 'yes,' 'no,' or 'I don't know.' You can keep asking until you get a 'no,' so it's best to start with broad categories."

Houki nodded as she listened to Ling's explanation, and then took another close look at Laura's sculpture. It was an imposing, solid conical shape that gave few hints as to its meaning. Really, everyone but Laura was curious about it.

"Is it something on land?"

"Mm."

"Okay. Is it bigger than a person?"

"It is."

So it obviously wasn't a hand tool or anything. Still, it being larger than a person left a lot of room.

"Is it found in cities?"

"Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't."

The answer threw the group into confusion, as most had been thinking it was Tokyo Tower.

"Is it manmade?"

"No."

"All right, questions over. You can make a guess if you want, Houki."

"Hmm. I may as well, I don't lose any points if I'm wrong."

Normally the questions would be done one-on-one written on a sheet of paper, but since they were just trying out the game, Ling had changed the rules.

"Go ahead."

"An oil rig!" Houki proudly mimicked with her fingers.

"Wrong."

As Houki pouted, Ichika and the others were left wondering where she even came up with that. And so the game continued toward its conclusion.

"If you don't get it right soon, no one will get any points for guessing it."

As an aside—Charlotte's horse had been guessed so early that she herself earned no points for it. The key to Barbarossa was to create a sculpture which was obvious, but only in retrospect. A correct guess in the mid-game gave points to both its guesser and its creator. Houki had made a well. It was hard to tell by sight, but Charlotte's expert questioning had deduced it at just the perfect time. The problem was Laura and Cecilia. Laura had her mysterious cone, and Cecilia had made a blob which looked almost like a bacterium.

"Is it a food?"

"No."

"Is it smaller than a building?"

"No, it's vast."

With their own sculptures guessed, Houki and Charlotte were fervently but fruitlessly trying to narrow down Laura and Cecilia's. Eventually, the game finished.

"So, Laura, what *is* that?" Ichika was the first to admit defeat and ask.

"What? You can't tell? And you think you're worthy of being my wife?"

"Uh, whatever. Just tell me."

"A mountain."

"A wha—"

"A mountain," Laura repeated.

"C'mon. What kind of mountain is that pointy?"

"Hmph. How rude. Isn't Everest like this?"

"Then isn't it Everest and not a normal mountain?"

"There are others too." Laura sat with her arms folded, insistent.

"Okay, okay. Anyway, no one guessed it, so you lose points. How about you, Cecilia?"

"Why, I can't believe no one managed to figure it out."

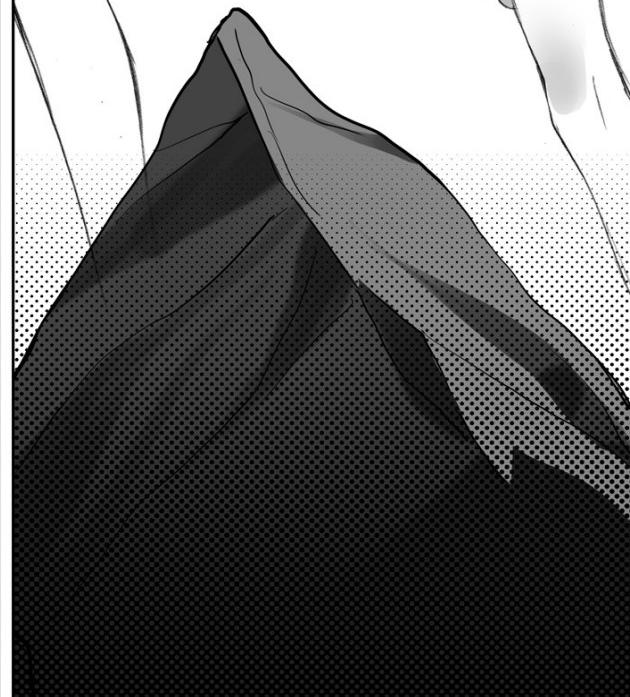
Ichika and Ling both had to hold back an "If we had we would have guessed it."

Cecilia glared at the others, while motioning haughtily with her left hand, "My homeland, England!"

"....."

The room fell silent. Their answers had been things like mashed potatoes, a protocell, extra-cheese pizza, an algae bloom, a rag, a hurt dog, and a jumping cat.





"I simply can't believe how uneducated you all are. It would behoove you to keep an atlas and look over it daily."

"The problem isn't that we don't know what England looks like!" was a response everyone thought, but no one could bring themselves to say. Cecilia had even more obvious pride in her sculpting abilities than Laura, and it would be rude to prod her further.

"Anyway! Now that everyone knows the rules, me and Ichika can play too."

The six gathered around the table again and started kneading. Of course, this meant the end of the last round's sculptures, but Ichika perched Charlotte's horse on his hand first, a bit reluctant to destroy it.

"You're really good at this, Charlotte. I almost want to keep this on a shelf."

"I'm not that good. It was just easy because it has four legs."

"There's no way I'd confuse it for a donkey or a camel, though. Good job."

"Thanks..." Charlotte shyly answered as the other four wondered why Ichika was so fixated on her today. Houki, Cecilia, and Laura, especially, felt their faces flush with indignation at the lack of a compliment.

"Rin, you can't make something that could be a bao or a dumpling."

"How rude! It's a manju!"

"That just makes it even more confusing!"

"Shut up! You're the one who made a cube and called it stew."

"C'mon, I made a bunch of them! And even Dan managed to figure it out."

"That's just because we'd just had stew for lunch!"

Jealousy shone on the others' faces as the two went back and forth about old memories. But the past was past. The future was what they could change. And then, the second round began.

"I know, it's a crab stick."

"Wrong! And rude, too!"

"Laura, is yours a person?"

"No. I don't know how you don't get it. I sculpted it perfectly."

"This time I've got it. Cecilia, yours has to be a tomato."

"Does this really look like a tomato to you, Houki?"

Time flew while they were having fun. Before they realized, it was past four o' clock, and there was another unexpected arrival.

"I thought it sounded a bit loud in here."

It was none other than Orimura Chifuyu. She was dressed in a jeans and boyfriend shirt combo that matched her active personality, with a black tank top underneath straining to hold in her breasts.

"Welcome home, Chifuyu."

"I'm back."

Ichika immediately rose to her side, taking her bag as if he were her personal valet.

"Have you had lunch? If not, is there anything you'd prefer?"

"What time do you think it is? Of course I ate."

"I see. Perhaps some tea? Would you prefer hot or cold?"

"Hmm. I just got back, so how about co—"

It was then that Chifuyu noticed. Noticed the jealous stares of her students as Ichika waited on her attentively.

"Actually, it's fine. I have to go right back out for work anyway."

"Oh? That's too bad, we were just about to have the coffee jelly I made this morning."

"I'll have to have it some other time. Anyway, I'm going to go change."

"Ah! I laid out a fresh suit for you, along with your fall clothes. Don't forget about them."

"Okay."

Chifuyu thought of joking that they were an old married couple, but then thought better of it. The girls were obviously already working toward that conclusion, and even if she was kidding she'd probably be taken too seriously. Instead, she simply closed the door behind her. Only then could the girls nervously exhale.

"You always suck up to Chifuyu."

"Oh? You think so? Isn't this how siblings normally get along?"

"Uhh. Maybe in your head."

Ling had been visibly irritated since Chifuyu's arrival—well, since Ichika's reaction to it. His other childhood friend Houki, though, had always realized how close they were and kept her worries about it bottled up inside.

*Is Ichika getting even more hung up on his sister?*

Cecilia and Charlotte, on the other hand, thought back to the previous month and silently deflated.

*She still only thinks of him as a little brother, surely...?*

*There's nothing else, no 'just the two of us' going on, right?*

*Laura's jealousy of their relationship had already come up once, but now it was aimed in the other direction. Hmph. Ichika, you're my wife! But if it's mein Lehre—no, even if it is her! I won't allow my wife to be so close to anyone else! But how do I... Ugh...*

An awkward silence settled over the living room.

"Huh? What's up, guys?"

"...Jelly."

"Huh?"

"Bring out that jelly! You already forgot about afternoon snacks, ugh!"

"What are you so mad about, Rin? You don't even like coffee."

"That doesn't mean I don't like coffee jelly!"

"Really? You said before you didn't want—"

"Well now I do! It's my new thing! Problem?"

“Not really, but...”

Ichika knew that discretion was the better part of valor here, and tried not to set off Ling, only for Houki to lay into him from the other side of the table.

“Ahem! Now that I think of it, I’ve become quite a fan of coffee jelly lately too.”

“Eh?”

“Maybe I can sample some.”

As he tried to stave off Houki’s stern demand, he ran straight into Laura.

“Yes. A sample. I must make sure her food isn’t poisoned.”

“Huh? What do you mean, Laura?”

“I mean I’m going to eat some. Bring me a dish.”

Then Cecilia and Charlotte joined in.

“Indeed! I’d like a sample as well!”

“I guess me too...”

“Even you, Charl? I don’t want to hear any complaints if you don’t like it...” Ichika resignedly stood up and headed toward the kitchen to pull the coffee jelly from the fridge. “I made six, so there should be just enough. Though that means none for Chifuyu...”

“She said she’d have to have it some other time, right?”

“I guess, but...”

Just as Ichika was about to finish, the door to the living room opened again.

“Are you arguing about something? I expect you to get along when you’re at my house.” Chifuyu had changed into a suit, and looked stunning enough—even to other women—to silence the girls. She briskly gathered a few final things, and not even two minutes later stepped back to the living room door.

“Ichika. I won’t be back tonight, so feel free. But no sleepovers. We don’t even have enough blankets for that,” she added before striding out again, leaving before anyone could even say goodbye.

“Did something come up at work for her? Well. I guess that happens.” Ichika set a coffee jelly on the table in front of each person. “Chifuyu likes them bitter, so feel free to add milk. And syrup, I didn’t add sugar either.”

After seasoning their dishes, everyone dug in. Laura and Cecilia had at first tried theirs black, but quickly changed their minds after their first bites.

“This isn’t half bad.”

“How’d a guy get so good at making desserts? It’s no fair.”

“Can you bake, Ichika?”

“I guess a sponge cake, maybe. The kind you’d have with cream and fruit.”

“That sounds simply wonderful. I’ll have to try it sometime.”

“If I ever get the chance.”

“And Ms. Orimura gets to eat your cooking every day? I’m jealous.”

"I don't think it's that big a deal. Hey, actually, how late are you all gonna be here? I've gotta go buy something for dinner if it's gonna be late."

Ten—well, at least nine—eyes glinted in unison as he spoke.

"Let me help out with dinner! I owe you after the jelly," Rin let out with a jump.

"Yeah! I'd love to show what I'm capable of," Houki replied.

"I guess I'll help too," muttered Charlotte.

"Myself as well, of course. My unit took turns cooking, so I know my way around a kitchen," said Laura.

"It's been some time since you all had the chance to try my cooking. Perhaps you've come to appreciate it?" Cecilia remarked.

Five people held in a 'no way' as Ichika glanced at the clock on the wall.

"All right, I guess let's head out at five? There's a supermarket nearby, we can just go there."

They continued to chat while finishing their coffee jellies. It went on and on, until it was five.



"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

Ms. Yamada—Yamada Maya—stepped into a basement bar in a shopping district near the station for a breather. It was 'Crescendo,' open from 4PM to 8AM. A stylish meeting place for grownups with all French furnishings, it was Chifuyu's usual spot.

"Sorry to drag you out here."

"Oh, it's no big deal. I was just sitting around looking through a catalog."

Maya sat down at the bar next to Chifuyu, who immediately ordered a black and tan. For Maya, of course.

"Can I get you another, Chifuyu?"

"Yes, please."

"Coming right up."

The owner-bartender, a bit of a silver fox with slicked-back hair and white mustache, had plenty of female regulars there for his looks. What brought Chifuyu back time and again, though, was the calm tone of his voice.

"Here you are."

After delivering Maya's black and tan, a schwarzbier for Chifuyu, and a complimentary cheese tray, he drifted away seamlessly. His long experience had taught him when to let people converse naturally, without the pressure of being watched.

"Cheers."

After clinking their glasses together, Maya took tiny sips, while Chifuyu took one long, slow one.

Once her glass was half empty, Maya inquired curiously. "So, why here today? It's a day off, isn't your place better?"

"That's what I thought, but then, out of nowhere, girls."

"A girl? Ooh, Ichika has someone over?"

"Yeah. My class, you know, the usual suspects."

"So the six with their own IS, all in one room. That's enough firepower to start a war."

"That's probably not a good thing to joke about." Chifuyu still chuckled, though, as she nibbled on some cheese.

"And what about you? What do you think of your little brother having a girlfriend?"

"Well..." Reaching the bottom of her glass, Chifuyu signaled for another. She took a long chug from this, her fourth, before continuing. "You remember the class trip last month?"

"Yes. Of course I do. So much happened."

"Never mind the Gospel. I said something I really shouldn't have."

"...Like?"

Maya's curiosity was written all over her face. She'd never seen Chifuyu be so evasive, and couldn't wait to find out what it was about.

"I said it to those five."

"Yeah?"

"I said I wouldn't let them have him."

"...Yeah?" Maya repeated with a blank look. She'd never seen Chifuyu be so out of sorts, but the alcohol was beginning to open her up.

"Well, uh, not like that. I mean, it's not about him, just... He's my little brother, you know?"

"I'm an only child, but I've heard."

"I didn't mean it weird or anything. But now... All of them think they've gotta look out for me, and they've backed off..."

Maya finished her glass, and fell silent until her refill came, "So are you okay with him going out with someone, or not?"

"I'm okay with it. He needs to learn. Learn how to deal with other people. Learn how to deal with women."

"So it's fine, then, right?"

"No, it isn't."

Maya stifled a surprised 'what?'

"I mean, it's not *not* fine, just... I want him to end up with the right woman. The boy has no judgment."

"So, you're worried about him?"

"Nah. It's his life. He needs to live it."

Another stifled 'what?'

"So what did you mean when you said that? Something like 'I won't let anyone I don't approve of have him!'"?

"Not quite, but... Honestly, I don't even know what I should have said." Chifuyu tilted back her glass and let the dark beer flow down her throat.

"Another, please."

"Coming right up."

Chifuyu chugged half of the fresh glass in a single gulp and continued, "Well, anyway. That's why I'm here today. If I was around, they'd never be able to work up the guts to do anything. I didn't want to get in the way."





"Sometimes you're just like Ichika." —Too kind for your own good, she meant.

"Whaa? How's that? Maya, you don't know a thing about men either."

"I guess." Maya giggled.

"Hmph..."

The idea of Maya as a little sister teasing her amused and angered Chifuyu at the same time, and she tilted back the rest of her beer in a single go.

"The night's still young, you know."

"Why don't you ever try saying that to a guy?"

"Why would I, when the manliest person I know is right here?" Maya grinned at Chifuyu cheekily.

"You mean the bartender? Go right ahead, I won't get in your way."

"Chifuyu, it's not nice to tease the elderly like that."

As if summoned, he appeared with another drink—but a salty dog, rather than a beer. The salt on the rim of the glass glimmered like snowflakes.

"...I didn't order another yet."

"I had the feeling you'd appreciate one, though."

"Hmph. Everyone around me just butts in all the time."

Chifuyu was bitter at being read so easily, but soon enough she lifted the glass to those scowling lips. Like two parents coddling an angry child, Maya and the bartender declined to reply directly.

"It's because you're well-loved. Right?"

"Right—I suppose I'll butt in with a meal as well," he spoke as he made his way back to the kitchen. Chifuyu, meanwhile, childishly took a handful of cheese and stuffed it in her mouth all at once.

"Everyone's growing and learning in their own way."

"Hahaha. You sound like an old lady."

"What's that supposed to mean? C'mon! Don't be mean to me!"

"Sorry, sorry."

Chifuyu laughing, Maya with a puffy-cheeked pout. The ice cubes in the salty dog clinked back and forth as if chuckling at the scene.



Meanwhile, back at the Orimuras'. The scene was as grim as a camp of soldiers awaiting a battle they knew would be their last.

"There. Ugh, these potatoes are so hard to peel."

Ling was, with an excess of caution, paring off not just the potato skins but chunks of the potato as well. Next to her, Cecilia, who allegedly knew how to make hashed beef, was enthusiastically squirting ketchup into a pan.

"Well, that's strange. It doesn't look anything like the pictures. Not nearly red enough."

"Uhh, are you sure you need that mu— Whoa! Turn that down!"

"No need to worry, Houki. My meals are always saved by the bell."

"This is cooking, not boxing..."

Houki, in a Japanese-style chef's coat and apron, sighed as she turned back to her own, less shambolic, dish: simmered flounder.

"What are you making, Charlotte? Yakitori?"

"Nah, Laura. This is fried chicken. I'm just marinating it a little."

"Oh, I see." As she spoke, Laura expertly paired a single long strip of daikon. Her knife skills would impress even a professional chef. Even if she hadn't been using a survival knife...

"You're amazing, Laura. Where'd you learn to do that?"

"By imitation. I saw a cook on TV do it."

"You can do it that smoothly just by imitating?"

"I'm already well-trained with a knife. Otherwise, in jungle warfare, I wouldn't be able to make a single trap."

"U-Uh, anyway. What are you making?"

"Oden."

"....."

"Oden."

"You didn't have to say it twice. But isn't that a winter food?"

"That doesn't mean you can't eat it in summer."

"Well, you're not wrong, but... Oh, can I have any daikon you have left over? Ichika said he wanted some in the marinade."

"....."

"Laura?"

With the sudden loud thwack of a knife onto a cutting board, Laura chopped the daikon in two.

"Oh, sorry. I was focused and wasn't listening. What was it?"

"If you have any spare daikon..."

"I see. Okay."

**Thwack!** A precise, five-centimeter length came off its tip.

"Chopping now."

**Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!**

The vision of an apron-clad girl with an eyepatch precisely, mechanically chopping a daikon was surreal. Ichika couldn't help but watch them cook with a sense of impending terror. Even though he was told to just relax and watch TV, the suspense of whether they'd collectively produce an edible meal was too much. Especially because if they didn't, it was his stomach on the line.

*It'll be fine, right? Edible, at least.*

His biggest worry was Cecilia, whose cooking he'd already experienced, but watching Laura cook, he mentally added her to the danger list.

"Hmm-hm-hmmm~♪"

Ling happily hummed to herself as she finished chopping her vegetables and began to sauté. It bothered Ichika that she wasted so much food while peeling, though.

He was suddenly reminded of the words of a famous foreign writer. "Let me tell you the good thing about time. It always passes." But that wasn't all.

"Let me tell you the bad thing about time. It always comes." And right now, the time had come.

"....."

Five hand-cooked dishes from five cooks sat on the table. Standing out conspicuously in the center were, of course, Cecilia and Laura's.

"What do you think, Ichika? It's my signature dish."

The hashed beef looked perfect, but the pungent smell coming off it was anything but.

*Tabasco?! Did you put tabasco in just to get it to turn red, Cecilia?!*

And Laura's...

"That's some... Unusual oden, Laura. It looks more like barbecue."

The single long skewers loaded with a mix of daikon, egg, fish sausage, and konnyaku were unusual enough, but for some reason, it also looked like it had been grilled rather than stewed in broth.

*Why was it browned? Was she trying to copy how it looked in comic books? No, wait, I don't want to know.*

Next, Ichika looked over to Ling's dish.

"What do you think of my beef stew? Great, isn't it?"

She was visibly proud of it, even though the potato chunks were smaller than the massive cubes of beef.

*Was it overdone? No, thankfully. At least the flavor would be fine. Rin's presentation has always left a bit to be desired.*

His nerve recovered, Ichika turned his eyes to the safe side of the table: Charlotte's fried chicken and Houki's simmered flounder. He'd suggested that everyone cook something so there'd definitely be enough, but he realized too late that he should have left the cooking to those two.

*These look great... Charl made the chicken perfectly bite-sized, and Houki's just plain a good cook. I can't wait.*

To be fair, no matter how bad the results were, he was still grateful that the others had cooked. A weakness of Ichika's, if you could call it that, was being unable to tell someone who'd worked hard on a dish that their cooking was bad.

"Let's eat, then. I never realized how much watching people cook works up an appetite."

"You're right. Time for dinner."

"Where are the plates, Ichika? I'll set the table."

"I'll get drinks, then."

"It feels weird each passing around a dish. I don't mind, though."

"It's called 'fun,' Laura."

Yes. It was fun. Ichika agreed. It was fun to cook for Chifuyu, too, but in a different way. This was closer to joy.

"Let's eat, then!"

After everyone sat down, Ichika spoke.

"Yes, let's eat."

It was a warm summer night memorable for, if not the flavors, then the pleasure of cooking and eating together.

## **Epilogue: Dark Harvesters**

"And that concludes our report on Orimura Ichika."

In a dark room, three women sat huddled around a table. Two were seated, while the one in the center stood. The air was as tense as if it were ministers convening with the crown.

"Maybe we should make our move now," the woman in the center half-whispered. Her voice, though quiet, was clear as a bell.

"I fear we may already be too late."

"More and more is indicating that now is the time. Perhaps the time for waiting is over."

As if waiting for royal assent, the two cast their gazes to the table. The three knew that the number of new students with their own IS, and the appearance of a complete wild card, required their attention.

"Hm..." The standing woman turned back from the window. "It's decided. Now is the time. That we may survive."

"Then..."

"I will attempt to seize his IS directly. You'll be my backup."

"U-Understood!"

"Understood."

A smile drifted to the woman's face. Like a hawk which had spotted its prey. Like the queen of a frozen realm. Enough to send a shiver down one's spine. Enough to terrify. A smile which could steal a soul.

"Prepare yourself, Orimura Ichika."

With the full moon at her back, the woman smiled. Her fan snapped shut, quietly but forcefully.

End of Volume Four.

## **Afterword: All Sales Final**

Hi, it's Yumizuru Izuru. What did you think of the summer vacation stories in Volume 4? I always ended up working through mine, so it was hard to base it off my own memories. At least I earned a lot of money. Even though I didn't get my homework done. Hahaha...

This volume was full of character studies. They've always kind of been my thing. When I used to write for games, this was how I laid out the plot too. I always end up wanting to fit in battles, though. There needs to be some kind of spark, don't you think?

Oh, by the way, while I was at the launch party Overlap put on, I got to talk a bit with the director Yutaka Yamamoto and the company prez Chiyomaru Shikura. They both take life so seriously. I need to learn to do that. And the desserts there were great. I gobbled so much cake. It's gonna make me fat.

Grunt, grunt.

Get some jogging or something healthy in while you read IS! Anyway, see you next time!

— Izuru Yumizuru





Subject	Celebration of Vol. 4 Release	
	Date	: 2013 / May, but it already feels like summer
	Time	: Not sure if that glow is dawn or dusk...
<input type="checkbox"/> Rough <input type="checkbox"/> Cleanup <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Afterword		<b>CHOCO</b> MUGITANI KOICHI <a href="http://chocolateshop-float.com">http://chocolateshop-float.com</a>

Just how long have I been here?

Outside my window, the disc of the sun rests on the horizon, dyeing the whole world red.

I can no longer tell whether it is the light of dawn, or the fading glow of dusk. The face of the clock holds no meaning as I fight a war inside my own mind.

The rising heat seeps through my body and spills out onto the woven paper that is the relic of a long-dead era. My longtime companion, it is now gone from this world, with only my dwindling stock remaining. I dip a 0.2mm mechanical pencil into its placid surface and—as if caught by undertow—it tears through the sheet.

I choke back a sob as if choking on smoke.

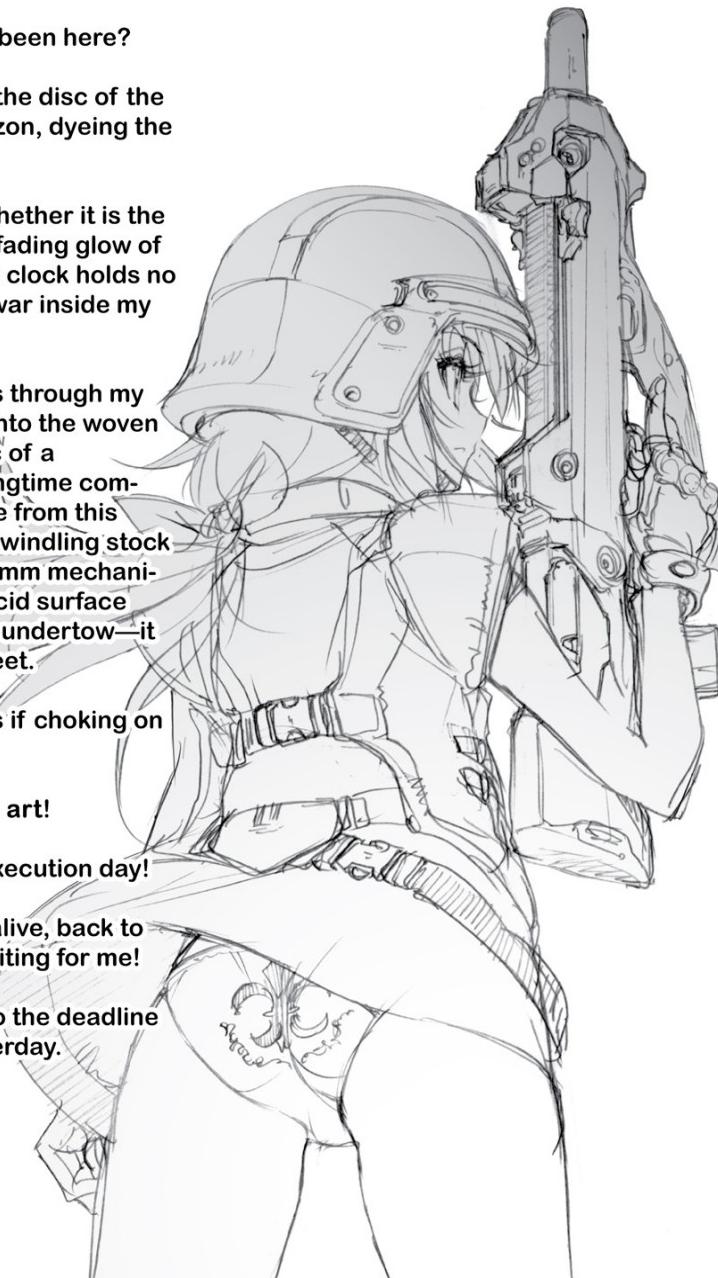
This is the war that is art!

The deadline is my execution day!

But I'll make it back alive, back to the lips of the girl waiting for me!

\*The glow is dawn, so the deadline was technically yesterday.

CHOCO











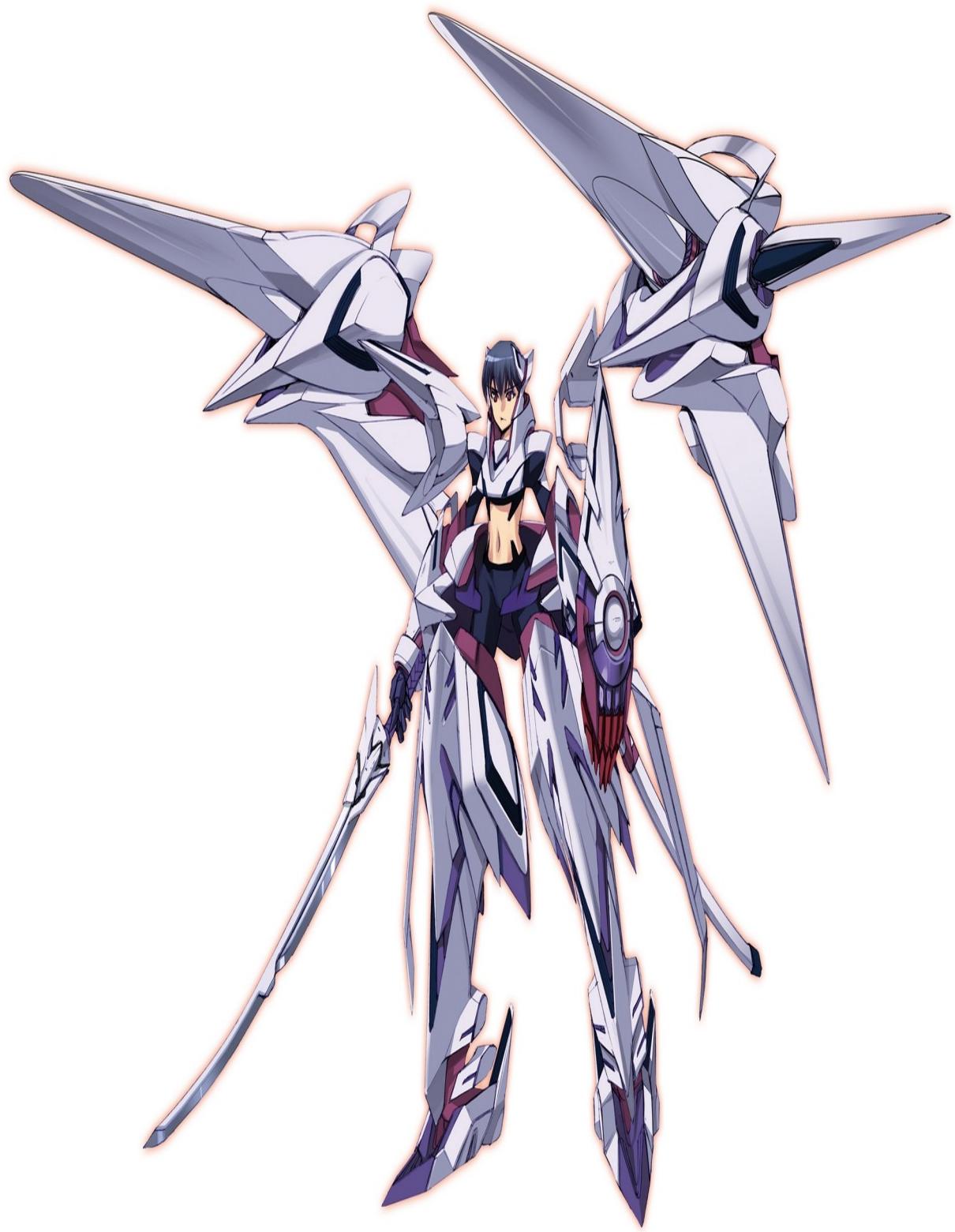
















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Infinite Stratos: Volume 4

by Izuru Yumizuru

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